

Less hunched his shoulders against the cold October breeze. He was wearing a turtleneck under a heavy (but somewhat moth-eaten) pea-coat the chill still managed to reach through the weaves. The leaves were resplendent, however, and piled in deep drifts on the side of the gravel path. It was several days after BoBo? had ingested the Bloodwort seed and Rover had finally resurfaced from his workshop. Less had been wanting to speak to the motley for some time and so he and the gnomish man were walking through the park on their way to Mizuko's pool. They were meeting the women there. Simon, he was told by a disembodied voice at the end of a telephone, was preoccupied by his business dealings. There was some high-powered deal going on within the walls of Glasshouse that would make it a major player in the entertainment industry. Less was happy for his success, but he missed his friend (and not only for the advice he sorely needed to act as king).

Rey stepped onto the path about a hundred feet ahead of him, wearing a lightweight coat that must be warmer than it looked. She looked invigorated by the weather, and had a happy smile on her face as she slipped her backpack off her shoulder. A small stainless steel thermos was in her hand as she closed the distance between them. "Here you go," she said, offering it to him. "Tea, made the proper way. I don't know how you like your tea, so I've brought little packets of sugar, milk, and some lemon wedges." Her practiced eye looked him over, and she looked as if she were going to say something else, but kept quiet.

To Rover, she offered another small thermos. "You seemed to me like a black coffee kind of person, but I do have stuff you can add if you prefer."

Less accepted the thermos. "Oh! Thank you, Rey! Just a splash of milk for me. Have you seen Mizuko yet?"

Rey shook her head as she handed Less the little restaurant-style milk cup. "Not yet."

The quiet sound of water running across dry leaves caught their attention. Turning to look off the path and into the spotty shade under leafless boughs, they saw Mizuko. She'd been in the pond but water was flowing off her, leaving her hair and clothes only slightly damp. She shivered, then found a pair of shoes she'd left there earlier, as well as a used jacket she'd purchased at a second-hand store. She approached Rey, Rover and Less and signed, "I found your message at the Hollow."

Rover sipped at his coffee carefully. He normally preferred the chill, chemical swill of a neon-colored energy drink. It was just a little too cold out today for that, however. His small body tended to lose heat quickly and he'd need all the warmth he could against a day like today.

The gnome was already dressed as if they were deeply into Winter. Once that seasons truly arrived, he vowed not to step foot out of his lab until the damned Summer Solstice.

"Nice to see you all," said Less. It had been a busy time since the battles with the Goblin King and the motley hadn't been meeting very regularly. "I've been meaning to discuss some things with you for a few weeks now but so many things have been happening that keep getting in the way." He glanced up at the icy crown that hovered above his head. "It's nearly time to renew the motley's pledge, for example."

"It is," Rey said. "I have do have something to tell all of you, though it might mean more to you, Less. With my becoming the Witch of the Bitter Wind, I've decided I need to be much more careful about my reputation, and the reputations of those around me. When we first came together as a motley, I told you all I made my money through illegal means. That is no longer the case."

Mizuko nodded and added in sign, "And so I also don't work for Rey anymore. Most important is that Less is King of Winter." She nodded respectfully toward his Crown. "But also since Rey and I have been appointed to official positions in the Ashen Court it may no longer be... appropriate to pledge our lives to each other. Nor necessary. I think that a promise to help each other is good enough without having to add rhetoric that indicates loyalty beyond death. I think the word is, 'overkill'. Am I making sense?"

Rey nodded, and looked at Less and Rover for their thoughts.

"I am not so concerned with how changelings make their way in the mortal world. It is a trial to fit in, and I accept that the paths taken may differ. I hope you have found gainful employment, Rey. I've heard Mizuko has," said Less. "I am in agreement with regards to the pledge. I do not want my new position to hold any undue leverage over any of you.

Mizuko wanted to be sure everyone was okay with the pledge otherwise. "I believe the pledge to still be fair to all with the small wording change. But if someone would like to change any benefit or obligation, now would be the time?"

"I am agree with reducing the obligations of the pledge," Rey said, and pulled a small business card case out of her backpack. She slipped a card out of it and presented it to Less. "You'll have to tell me if this is gainful employment." She gave him a bemused smile. The card was one of her super-official ones, naming her the general manager and chief financial officer of the Mountain Garden Casino.

Less took the card and examined it before slipping it into his wallet. "So, from prostitutes and drugs to gambling. From illegal to legalized. Baby steps first, eh Rey?" Less enjoyed teasing her. Rey could be so serious but when she smiled it was like a field of blooming wildflowers.

Rey chuckled and smiled. "Both of those were necessary at the time, but now I have far more lucrative ventures in the works. And yes, they're all legal too." She paused for a moment, then continued. "Less, can we talk about some things after we're done here? I'd like a bit of advice."

"I don't get it." Rover held a puzzled expression. "So you guys went and picked up some new day jobs. I've never let any of the courts live my life in the past, why should that matter now? If I was willing to lay my life down before, I still am and I'm still willing to put that into pledge."

"Unless by 'overkill' you somehow think we're no longer facing mortal danger. That we *won't* potentially be saving each other from premature demise in the near future. No offense, but it seems to me that official titles make you more of a target. Not less of one. You kids are going to need my help more than ever."

He paused to take another sip of the coffee. The warmth spreading through the gnome's old bones felt wonderful against the chill air.

"Or is this some attempt to avoid crafting a cabal within the Ashen court? Help me out here. I'm willing to drop whatever you want from the pledge, I just don't get the motivation."

"It's a matter of loyalties," Rey explained. "As one of the Courtless, your loyalties are to yourself, to the Duchy, and to whomever you wish to give it to. For the rest of us, things are a bit more complicated. Less' first loyalty, as the Winter King, must be to his Court. For Mizuko and I, ours must be to our Queen." She glanced at Mizuko and Less before continuing. "Mizuko and I cannot enter into a pledge that would force us to have to betray Autumn in favor of Winter if it comes down to a matter of life and death, and Less cannot afford to be forced to potentially leave his Court leaderless for something other than the benefit of the entire Duchy.

"Now, I'm not saying that I wouldn't be willing to lay down my life for any of you, and I know you'd do the same for me. Not putting that strong of a clause into our motley pledge will never change that. But politics and appearances are very important now, even if we don't agree with them."

"I agree," Mizuko said. "My commitment to this motley remains the same. Only the wording need be changed so that should our loyalties be questioned, we can protect ourselves and the motley from criticism and scrutiny."

"I'm happy with limiting our pledge to protect against mutual betrayal," said Less. "We share a home in the Hedge that must remain safe and we must guard that trust. Let the giving of our lives for each other be voluntary."

"Politics..." The old gnome grumbled. "Fine. Even the best timepieces may have a shiny casing. Just so long as it doesn't affect the way the motley works, I'm okay with it."

Mizuko repeated the promise they'd made to each other every month since they gathered as a motley, exchanging the words promising aid even unto death with promising aid even at risk to themselves, binding herself to it.

When all the members of the motley had renewed their pledge, Less brought up the next order of business. They were walking along a path where the trees arched over the path, their bare branches interwoven in a dark spiderweb. The park workers had not tended to this winding trail recently and the footing was uneven with fallen branches. It kept the joggers away. "I encountered something strange at the train station. This was before the assault on Circledell, I've only just now had the chance to bring it up. I saw a woman dressed in old, shabby clothing in the cab of the city train with the engineer. She ran off but moved faster than anything I've seen. Faster almost than the eye could follow! When I confronted the engineer, he acted as if drugged and denied ever seeing a woman. He was stuffing bloody tissues into the garbage and I found a spot of blood of the floor of the cab. I don't know what to make of it, beside the fact that the woman must have been supernatural in some way, but an engineer in his state could cause a commuter train collision. Does anyone know anything about fast-moving people?"

"Was she very pale?" Rey asked. The presence of blood, someone moving supernaturally fast, and an apparent mortal acting drugged narrowed down the field considerably.

Mizuko frowned though she didn't have anything to add at the moment.

"I didn't notice. I only saw her for a moment before she ran into the train tunnel."

Mizuko signed, "I could investigate the subway tunnels for you."

"I could go with." Rover volunteered. "It'll be good exercise for BoBo. I swear he actually gets bored, now."

"I accept your offers," said Less. "But I would like to know a bit more about what me might find down there. Rey, do you have any occult insight on what this supernatural might be? I didn't notice anything fae about her that might suggest she was a hummingbird, squirrel or cheetah Beast, but it is easy to hide that sort of thing from casual observation."

"The woman could be one of two things," Rey said. "She might be a werewolf, but I've never heard of any dealing in blood or running around in tunnels. However, given the engineer's behavior as you've described it, combined with blood being present, I'd suspect the woman might be a vampire. If that is the case, and if she knows you saw her, you might be in danger."

"A vampire?" Less cast a glance at Mizuko. "If so, she's taking her sweet time to act. It's been weeks since I saw her. What do we do about vampires? Investigate by day, armed with stakes and garlic while dodging subway trains, or leave her a note requesting her to keep her fangs off the engineers?"

Mizuko's eyes flicked to Less, concern on her face. "Maybe it's best if I make some quiet inquiries first," Mizuko suggested in sign. "We wouldn't want to become someone's dinner if there happens to be a group of them down there."

"It doesn't sound like she's actually dangerous." The image of a vampire had come to Rover as well, but only because of Hollywood. He would actually be surprised if reality matched the cinema so closely even just

this once.

"I'd like to find her and talk to her. I once had a theory about setting up a network of donors based on the popularity of vampirism in popular media. They have a lot of fans these days. I'm sure it would be easy to arrange for willing volunteers, but I'd have to talk to an actual vampire to get hard data for the logistics."

"Most vampires would kill you or enslave you," Rey said, "if they knew their secrets were about to be exposed. To them, humans are nothing more than a walking food source." She glanced at Mizuko, then continued. "There may be exceptions, but I doubt any of them would be willing to sit down and chat with you about their nature, Rover."

"Your knowledge of most vampires is impressive," Mizuko signed with a smile, "and it's worth pointing out that it is dangerous to make contact with any supernatural being — including other fae. However, as members of the Autumn Court, it falls to us to take such risks in the pursuit of knowledge. Does it not, Lady Sage?" Mizuko addressed Rover. "I think that Rey just means she hopes you don't try to have a sit-down with a vampire without backup. A surprise could leave you with a very bad night."

Rey's eyes narrowed slightly, but her face quickly cleared. "That is part of it. Having once been the target of a vampire's... *interest*, and close friends being victimized by them, I know the importance of being prepared when dealing with them. If you do decide to investigate vampires, I trust you will do so with caution and a very good plan."

"Just to address Rover's point," said Less. "If this vampire continues to feed on the train engineers, then she is very dangerous. If the train takes the wrong switch path, it will end up going the wrong way around the loop and will collide head-on with another train."

"And people call *me* anti-social." was all Rover had to say on the subject of vampiric mannerisms. "But since she chose to allow Less to live with the knowledge of her existence, then maybe she's something else. We could just try keeping an eye out around the trains, watch for people acting like they've been drugged, while 'Zuko runs her inquiries?"

"Is there something that will ward off vampires that I can put in the train cabs?" asked Less.

"Not that I can immediately think of," Rey admitted. "I can find someone to ask, though, and let you know."

"What time of day did this fast-moving woman appear," Mizuko asked Less. When he told her it was around 3:35, she frowned. "I didn't think vampires moved around during the day."

"Hm." Rey looked thoughtful, chiding herself for making vampires the cause of all evil. "I didn't think they did either. Something to ask about. If it's not a vampire, then I don't know what she might have been." She thought, perhaps, it might have been a ghoul, but she didn't know what, if any, benefits one would get from the blood of their master. She looked at Mizuko, wanting to ask her so many questions, but afraid to do so, unsure if she wanted to hear the answers - or even if her friend would answer them.

Mizuko returned Rey's look curiously. Rey quickly signed "talk later?" to her and Mizuko nodded in agreement.

"I guess we're back to square one," noted Less. "I'll keep a close eye or two on the engineers until we can learn a bit more. It might be useful to wander the neighbourhood to see if there are any other sightings or victims. Rover and I can do it while Rey and Mizuko follow up on their sources."

"I still think that it might be useful to talk to the old lady if we can... but, no, I'm not going to do so recklessly." He reassured the others. "I seem to remember reading somewhere that not all 'vampires' are the same. It's a condition, not a breed. There's about as much variety to their moods as the human stock they

come from. We may have a chance to get out of this one without a fight."

"We should probably avoid being in the tunnels," Rey added, "unless we're on one of the trains until we know what we might be dealing with."

"How long will it take you and Mizuko to run down your contacts?" asked Less.

"I don't know," Mizuko admitted. "Maybe a few days. Maybe never."

"Same here, I expect," Rey said. "No guarantees, though."

"Well, the situation seems dangerous enough that I think that we should all check in each night with each other. In case we are in danger, the code word shall be "titanic". If you are being forced to check in by captors, then use that word somehow and we'll know something is wrong." Less looked at each of them to make sure they understood. "Anything else on the agenda?" he asked in a lighter voice.

Rey was a tiny bit amused by his use of code words, but said nothing, as she understood that was his way - and it made sense. She shook her head. "Nothing that involves everyone."

Mizuko shook her head.

Glymjack Motley Pledge

Type: Vow

Tasks: Alliance, Medial (-2, all parties)

Boons: Adroitness (+1 to all Empathy dice pools*, all parties), Blessing (Language (Glymjack Cant)** 1 and Language (Choice) 1, all parties)

Sanction: Poisoning of Boons (-3, poisoning both Boons)

Duration: 1 month (28 days) (+2)

Invocation: 1 Willpower (all parties)

Conversation

After saying goodbye for now, Mizuko headed north toward the nearest bus station she could reach on foot. Mizuko was on the sidewalk just west of the train station when she heard a voice behind her.

"Mizuko," Rey called out. There was a slight edge to her voice as she waited for her friend to stop. Mizuko turned and looked back at Rey.

Rey closed the distance between them. "I haven't heard or seen much of you since you left," she signed.

Mizuko nodded once.

"Where are you living now?" Rey tried to keep her hand motions calm and smooth, but inside, her emotions were churning.

"Santa Fe," Mizuko signed in Glymjack.

Rey's hands clenched into fists, and after a moment, she managed to relax her hands. "Do you have an address and phone number you can give me, in case I need or want to talk to you?"

Mizuko nodded, then signed to Rey the address where she lived. "I have no phone. I haven't had time to make enough money to cover what I need yet. Luxuries must wait."

"You got a job. That's great," Rey smiled. "Where are you working. As in the place."

"Corazon's," she spelled out in sign. She associated it with a the letter C in Glymjack and followed it with a palm-up gesture. The new word she'd made would be faster to express in sign, and made one think of waiting tables.

"I guess you haven't been working the nights I was there," Rey said. Alexei hadn't said anything to her about Mizuko working there, but then again, Rey hadn't asked. "But I don't know why you're worried about a phone. You've got one."

"I'm not there on busy nights," Mizuko signed. "I'm not a very good waitress. And no. I do not have a phone."

"Yes, you do," Rey signed, her hand movements harsh. "The one I bought for you."

"I do not have that phone," Mizuko repeated. "There is no use being angry about it. It was part of the deal we had. That arrangement ended."

"So, if you stop working for Alexei, you intend to give back all the money he paid you?" Rey signed, and then continued before Mizuko could reply. "Do you have any idea how much it hurt me when you walked out and left those clothes and the phone behind?"

"It's what you wanted. You are being irrational," Mizuko stated.

"No," Rey said aloud. "It was not what I wanted." She returned to signing. "You said you thought you should take a break. I thought you meant take a vacation or something. Not move out. The clothes and the phone weren't things on loan to you. They were purchased for you in exchange for the work you did. They were part of your paycheck. They are still yours."

"I did not want them. They reminded me of the life I had to give up in order to take on that role with you," Mizuko signed. She studied Rey, wondering if her friend understood what she was trying to tell her.

"Then why didn't you tell me that?" Rey signed, the pain she'd felt when she saw the things sitting abandoned on the futon evident on her face.

"Because it wasn't as important as your reputation. That's why you did what you had to do. There was no point in making you regret your actions. I didn't intend harm by leaving the clothes you purchased for me, either. I simply didn't want them."

Rey simply stared at her friend. "What I regret is you thinking you had to leave simply because you don't work for me anymore. I don't care about the clothes. I just felt..." Rey's fingers stopped moving, and she dropped her hands to her sides.

Mizuko closed to within a foot of Rey. "Rey. *It had to happen the way it did,*" Mizuko stated quietly. "I wouldn't have found any kind of work that wouldn't have hurt my reputation or standing near Iron Mountain. I have no ID, so I have to be paid cash. That means crime or work for someone who understands. To make it out there, then I also need roommates and I wouldn't have had those either had I not been prepared to leave when I sent away your prostitutes."

"I know," Rey whispered. "It was hard for you and I do regret that. Will you please take the cell phone back? It's under contract and I'm still paying for it. I'd feel better knowing you had a way to contact the rest of the

motley easily if you need us."

Mizuko nodded.

Rey pulled it out of her backpack and offered it to her friend. She'd hoped Mizuko would accept it, and brought it along just in case. Mizuko tucked it into the pocket of her jacket.

Rey smiled, one worry gone from her list of concerns. "Make sure you call me once in a while, okay? I'd like to know how things are going."

Mizuko nodded to the affirmative again.

Rey reached out to take Mizuko's hand in hers and give it a gratified squeeze. Before she let go, she asked "Are you still seeing Remy?" Her tone was friendly, and it was something that she knew she had to come to terms with. Mizuko was good at taking care of herself for the most part, and Rey knew she had to learn to let go of her prejudices if it meant keeping their friendship alive.

Mizuko looked very sad, though she was unaware her expression had given away her feelings. She sighed, "I would if I could. I haven't seen him since the Tuesday before Circedell and Iron Mountain. I have no way to contact him."

Rey hesitated for a moment, then spoke. "Would you like me to try and see if I could get a phone number for you, or some other way you can get in touch with him?" She didn't know what Mizuko might think of the offer, but it was in earnest. And she'd try her best not to use the information against him, as she reminded herself that Remy, perhaps, wasn't quite an evil bloodsucking fiend as she might have thought before.

Mizuko thought about it carefully for a moment. Then she shook her head. "If I'm meant to cross paths with him again, then it will be. I have already tried to locate him — I tried very hard but came up empty. If he values his privacy that much, then it will do no one service by hunting him down and breaching that. I work at Corazon's, so there is a chance he might appear one day."

"Okay. I meant to ask you before, did he tell you why he was at the warehouse that night?"

"He owns them. He was driving by when he noticed a disturbance, then came to see what was going on," Mizuko said.

"Very lucky for us," Rey said, and very interesting as well, though she kept that thought to herself. "Oh, I also have this for you." She took a small thermos out of her backpack. "It's tea, the kind you really like, made just the way you like it. It should still be warm."

Mizuko's expression softened. "Thank you," she signed.

"You're welcome," Rey signed in return. "Here, take it. You can keep the thermos if you'd like. If you'd rather return it, you can give it to me the next time we see each other. I should be visiting the club soon. Maybe I'll see you then?"

Mizuko's flicker of a smile affirmed the hope.

Remy [made contact](#) with Mizuko a few days later. In her excitement to see him again, she forgot to ask him about the underground but she made contact with him over the phone the following night. She told him that she may be drawn into an investigation of the underground portion of the Mythic subway because something

very strange was witnessed by an ally of hers. She told him that a woman was seen with an engineer, that some form of blood exchange was involved and that she was inhumanly quick.

She asked him, "Since I may be drawn into an investigation of the subway system, I need to know if this really involves a vampire or if it's something else. If it's something that can be dealt with, I want to help the investigator do so safely and intelligently and avoid a violent exchange. Or worse, exposure of either of our people."

Remy first asked if the ally in question happened to be Miss Rey Lafitte, but Mizuko told him it was not. He sounded a little relieved. Then he told her that the underground system the subway and underground trains used around Mythic were controlled by vampires and that attempting to investigate them — or their servants — would be a very bad thing. He stressed that in fact to make sure Mizuko understood, and told her, "If you are found in there, you are meat for their table."

Mizuko less than a week after she told Less she'd make some inquiries, Mizuko was again waiting for Less at his door — this time standing there in the morning waiting for him to leave for work. She said she didn't know when he got up and didn't want to wake him, so she hadn't knocked. Then she repeated to Less all that Remy had told her about the underground.

"So, she could be a vampire after all," mused Less. "And yet, she can walk about freely during the day. That is very interesting." Less thought about it and shrugged. "I'm not about to deny them their right to exist, but I will try to get a message to them regarding the train engineers."

"It could reveal yourself to them," Mizuko pointed out, "if they were unsure who or what you were. Please be careful."

"If revealing myself is what it takes to avoid a head-on train collision at rush hour, so be it," replied Less. "But I will be careful," he added.

"Do you really think there is a danger of that happening?" Mizuko signed.

"The engineer I saw with the woman was definitely loopy enough to make a mistake. If he ignored the signals and went the wrong way around the track, there might not be the time to stop it. There is a lot of responsibility as a train engineer."

Mizuko nodded. Like most passengers, she viewed the train as something that just worked and was always on time and never stopped. The system was more vulnerable to failure than she had realized. "Okay," she signed. "Just try not to end up as someone's dinner. Send others if you have to. You are important."

"I'll be careful," he promised.

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Later that day, near the end of his shift, Less saw a striking young woman sitting on a bench in the waiting area of the station. She had long strawberry blonde hair, worn up in a business-like hairdo. It made sense, given she was wearing a dark, khaki green suit that flattered both her complexion and her figure. Next to her stylishly shod feet was an elegant attache case. He noted she knew he was watching her, and her little smile turned into a grin when she winked at him. It was a moment before he realized her fingers had moved in the Glymjack signs for "Hi, Less."

Surprised to see the unique language used by a stranger, he surreptitiously signed "M or R?" to the woman as he approached her bench. He busied himself with picking up the rubbish on the floor around the bin while he kept an eye on her response.

The woman's hazel eyes twinkled with mischief, as she signed "woof" in the guise of pulling a leather portfolio out of her briefcase.

As he tamped the trash in the bag he signed, "Capital V?"

The woman pulled a report cover out of the portfolio and opened it up to read it. Beneath it she signed "R. Got info on vampires as promised. Need to talk to you."

He signed, "Lost and Found" and left the waiting room to the more private lost luggage storage room. He unlocked the door and raised the wicket window.

After a few moments, Rey stood and walked over to the window. "Sorry if I startled you," Rey said unrepentantly. She placed her portfolio on the little counter, and Less could see the end of an envelope sticking out toward him. "That envelope is yours. It's the info I was able to get, written in our Cant. Turns out it is possible for them to be running around during the day, so long as they're not exposed to sunlight." Her voice was soft, carrying just far enough to reach his ears.

He slid the envelope out and pocketed it. He signed, "So, if they wear clothes and a large hat they can go wherever they want?"

"Don't know about that," Rey signed in reply, "but if they stay underground and in tunnels, they're fine. They're not likely to head out with just some clothing on, though. Fire and sunlight are the only things that truly destroy them, and those things send them berserk. When they're like that, they're likely to kill everyone and everything around them. And my sources say that symbols of faith have no effect, as far as they have seen."

"What happens to them if they do leave the tunnels? Could the pale woman be a vampire?"

"If they leave the tunnels at night, or stay out of sunlight, probably nothing. If the sun catches them, then I wouldn't be surprised if 'flame applied to extra-dry tinder' is an accurate description. I can't say for sure. Given the description you gave of her, coupled with her supernatural speed, and the presence of blood as you mentioned, that's my first instinct. Or it might be one of their blood slaves.

"To be honest, I wouldn't be surprised if the vampires have been there for a very long time, and you had the fortune - or misfortune - to notice it. And now that they know you suspect something, you're at risk. Winter cannot afford to lose you, so be careful. Don't meet her eyes if you can avoid it, and please, be careful."

"What's a blood slave?" asked Less.

"Someone addicted to vampire blood and completely enslaved to a vampire. Think crackhead with supernatural powers who'll do anything to make their crack - the vampire - happy."

"I suppose that means if the woman is somehow a day-going vampire, then my friendly engineer is a blood slave. Not very reassuring. What do you suggest?"

"You've never had any problems with him before, have you? Then I'd say just keep an eye on him the same way you do all the other engineers that work through here," Rey said, "and just let it go for now. If you let them think you've decided nothing's wrong, then they may decide to leave you alone. If they think you're getting too close or may otherwise become a problem, then they may decide to do something about it. They could do any number of things, from using their influence to get you figured or transferred to another station, to trying to turn you into a blood slave, to arranging for you to have a very tragic accident. Now, I don't know if we *can* be turned into ghouls, but it is a possibility.

"In my experience, one of the best defenses we have is to know what's around us, but don't let them know.

Don't let them know you know they're anything other than human. That way, if they do try something, then you just might have an advantage that could get you out of the situation and somewhere safer." Rey opened the portfolio and picked up her pen as if she was going to write something down. "Trying to confront most supernaturals head on is suicide. Piss a werewolf off enough and he'll just tear your head off and walk away. Vampires, it depends on what they want, and how valuable and/or dangerous they believe you are."

Less considered for a moment. "Sound advice. I'll do what I usually do. Watch and compile information. Thanks for your help, Rey."

"No problem," she replied with a slight incline of her head. "Now, I've got something of a personal question for you, if I may?"

"Of course."

"I saw Simon very briefly today," she said. "With Simon not being part of the motley anymore, he felt it left you in kind of a lurch. He told me you'd come to him for advice on how to be king. I was wondering if you might be willing to consider coming to me. I'll have different ideas and suggestions than Simon, of course, but I think I can help."

Less felt a little embarrassed. Simon had a free, easy-going spirit that made him easy to talk to. Plus, he was a fellow man. He worried that taking clothing advice from a woman, Rey or otherwise, would be too much like his mother dressing him. He did appreciate the sentiment though. "Oh, he mentioned that? Well, I wasn't exactly looking for advice on how to *be* king. The bureaucracy is falling into place quite nicely. The Winter Court just isn't used to schedules and duties." Less doodled nervously in the lost-and-found logbook. "I approached Simon more for advice on how to *act* kingly. I have a deep compassion for people, changeling and mortal, but you may have noticed that it stems from an academic, rational sense of justice. So, I know what I should do - or more usually, I know what I should *have done*. It doesn't come naturally. I hoped Simon could coach me on the public image side of things. I really appreciate the offer to help, Rey, I really do. I'm only worried that being advised by the Witch of the Bitter Wind would make me look like an Autumn puppet. Queen Veridia has already announced that she expects the other Courts to give up a month of their rule to me..." He stopped, unsure how to proceed.

"Unless you're offering me an official position in the Winter Court," Rey said with a little smile, "I don't think it would be a problem. I may be the Witch Lafitte, but I am also a member of your motley, which everyone knows. Unless you intend on advertising you're getting advice from me, I doubt it will be a problem." She paused, then lowered her voice a touch. "Less, I haven't told anyone in Mythic this, but I grew up with con men as parents, and I lived with a pack of werewolves for a couple of years before I was Taken. I know the importance of image, and learning how to tread sticky waters. But if you're worried about me dressing you funny or otherwise inappropriately, just remember the suit I made for you." She shook her head. "I'm not going to try and change you into what I think would be a good Winter King. You know why? Because I like you exactly as you are, but more importantly, *Winter* chose you exactly as you are. If you'll accept my help, I'll help you become the best Winter King you can be."

Rey was usually so tight-lipped about herself that it shocked him to hear her reveal things about her past. Achieving the position of Autumn Witch must have had a deep and profound affect on her. "It means a great deal to me that you would offer your help," he said sincerely. "And I accept it. All my life I have been in service to the Courts, invisible and without much responsibility. Now, Winter needs me to represent them, to lead them, to be responsible for them. It is overwhelming."

"It can be," Rey said with a nod, "and best to deal with it in small chunks. The first one will be the easiest, though. Clothes shopping. Like a new peacoat. There's nothing wrong with dressing subtly and so you blend in. But changing to something completely different will cause too many questions." She smiled gently. "But we can talk more about this later, when you're not working. I've got to get going." She closed the portfolio and placed it back in her briefcase. "And just to make this conversation work related for you, I did lose

something on one of the trains last week. A small change purse. There wasn't anything in it, and not very valuable except for sentimental reasons. It was a dark navy blue, with a rose in faded red silk embroidered on it."

"Municipal or inter-city?" asked Less as he scanned the logs for Rey's purse. "The thing about new clothes is that they cost money. I may be king but the crown doesn't come with a treasury."

"Municipal," Rey replied, "I'll lend you what you need to start updating your wardrobe. I've got a new investment that's going to start paying off very soon, so it won't be a hardship for me."

Less picked his way along the shelves of lost items. He kept them well organized and it wasn't long before he retrieved the purse. "If you're sure that it won't put you out," he said while he had Rey sign for her possession. "I'll think about it and let you know." His debts to the generous woman were quickly mounting.

"Less," Rey said as she set the pen down. "We're both Glymjacks. I don't consider you owing me anything for my help. I know you'd do the same for me."

"Okay," said Less as he closed the logbook. "Thank you very much. I'll let you know how things go."

—

Rover and Less took a look around the neighborhood. Of course, the Bleak Seal was able to assist as well with standard reports. Worm informed her King and Constable that things had calmed down in his immediate area ever since the prostitutes moved on. There had even been a new gang moving into the area, but their ambition had redirected itself elsewhere around the time the brothel closed. Rover found he could go about his business without harassment.

Less also watched the engineers. He noted that the engineer he thought might have been on some kind of drug was back at the helm as usual. The man adopted an odd habit of smiling and waving at Less whenever he saw him. But that wasn't to say there wasn't something strange going on.

Although Less didn't detect a second incident of odd behavior, he *did* spot the strange woman in raggedy clothes on two occasions. On both occasions, it was after sunset and she was watching him from within a crowd of waiting passengers. Unlike most memories that fade somewhat with the passing of hours or days, he remembered every detail. She had startlingly blue eyes. On both occasions, she wore a dark, frayed shawl over her head and shoulders. Her hair must also have been dark because it framed her pale, white face very well. She had a smudge of dirt here and there on her cheek or nose or chin (it was different each time he saw her). Most of the rest of her was blocked by other people around her, but he remembered seeing one pale hand that confirmed she was quite thin. Her expression on each occasion was coldly calculating.

Less would stare back but the moment he made to approach her, she'd disappear.

The crisis of the engineer seemed to have passed, but he was worried by the surveillance on him. He decided that a direct confrontation with the woman would be unwise. Talking with the engineer would be safer, but he felt that it would be fruitless. A message did have to be left, however.

He met Rover for lunch at the cafeteria one day. After a small meal, the pair donned the highly reflective safety vests and white hardhats of the railway surveyors. Less carried a bag with a couple of cans of spray paint he had confiscated from a couple of teenagers he'd caught tagging the platform. They walked alongside the rails to the tunnel but kept well clear so as not to draw attention to themselves. The trains were still running and anyone near the rails or tunnel entrance would be a breach of safety. They found a transformer box near the switching station and while Rover kept watch, Less shook the spray can and wrote, "Eng'rs need faculties. Train acc'ts not tolerated!" There wasn't much room for more, so he hoped the mysterious pale woman would get the message.

The going wasn't easy for Rover at the moment. Poor lighting and groundwork that'd never really been intended for actual feet provided plenty to stumble over. The little gnome had to hustle even under the best of circumstances to keep pace with the others, but these tunnels were proving a real challenge.

Fortunately, he had come up with a solution to that long ago. Even if BoBo had undergone some cosmetic changes, he was still the same old steed he ever was. To any casual observer, it looked as if Rover were riding about on a rugged-looking mobility scooter. Less, however, knew better.

"Train accounts?" Rover asked, unsure as to what the abbreviation was to mean."

Less cocked his head at the wet paint and his mouths made all manner of grimaces. He tried to squeeze in 'd' before the 't' by writing above the line. A drip of paint ran down and basically erased the apostrophe. He snarled to himself but restrained himself from dabbing at the wet paint with his uniform. "It's meant to be *accidents*." He shrugged. "It doesn't matter that much. From what Rey tells me, if they are vampires they've probably been feeding off the engineers since the subway existed without any problems. I'm just doing my due diligence."

As they walked back to the station, Less commented to Rover about their investigations around the neighborhood. "So, no prostitutes, no gang to speak of, and no evidence of vampires. I'll be facing gentrification before you know it!"

That comment raised an eyebrow on the gnome.

"Isn't that just a fancy way of saying that nothing could possibly go wrong?" Rover asked. "Now I've never really been one to put my faith in fate, but in our lines of work it just doesn't pay to tempt the so-called higher powers of the universe."

"Maybe," said Less conversationally. "Though Simon was always trying to tempt Cassandra, and nothing happened to him."

Rover chuckled at that. "Yeah, but Cassandra is probably a lot more forgiving than the universe. I'm pretty sure she at least has a better sense of humor. But getting back to the problem at hand, we *know* that there's someone out here bleeding the conductors. If we're going to find them then we may have to actually go into the tunnels."

"True, but is it a problem? We feed off emotions. Does that mean we have more right to exist? The engineer is not dead and seems to be able to function well enough to do his job safely. Mizuko says that vampires are extremely dangerous so I'm not inclined to invade their territory without a very good reason. That said, if the situation changes and the trains become unsafe because of them then we will need to do something. If you have any spare time, you could get a jump on stuff to help us explore the tunnels and flush them out. That way we'd be able to act immediately if the need arises."

"Blood seems like a more rare commodity than emotion. Humans seem to have an excess of lust... hate... all of that fun stuff. Not so much with blood, however. While I don't think we have any more *right* to exist, I do think we have safer feeding habits. I'd like to find out exactly what's going on before any accidents.

"Plus there's just the raw, scientific curiosity to consider. I have to admit, this is starting to become a fascinating subject. I'd be happy to start exploring."