

*December 7, 2011*

Rey sat at her small kitchen table, newspaper clippings, computer printouts and CDR's littered across the surface surrounding her laptop. She was tired - no, more than tired, practically exhausted. She'd spent almost every waking moment since Hallowe'en she wasn't at work researching and following up leads. For the first week of November, she'd had nightmares, reliving the terror she'd experienced when she'd walked into the House of Haunts. Richard'd said there was no way she'd been transported back to her Keeper's Garden, but he wasn't there. He hadn't seen what she'd seen, heard what He'd said, and saw the portal she'd escaped through.

She'd have been willing to let it go, doing nothing more than satisfy her curiosity about the carnival. That was, until the missing person stories started appearing. Every one of them had been to Tyrone Hamilton's ball, and likely gone into the House of Haunts. That's when the research had become serious. She used very contact she had, paid out just about all her free cash in bribes and "donations", to get what little information she had.

Rey compiled everything into a single document and made several copies, including some burnt onto disks. One she put in a safe deposit box, one in the safe in her office at the casino, and four others sat on the chair next to her. One of them was for Less, and the others she was going to ask him to pass along to the other Regents. In Veridia's was tucked a small envelope with a note telling her about Sylvia and the other women, in case Richard hadn't passed that information along already. She probably ought to have given that last bit of info to her queen a while ago, but Rey was concerned that Sylvia might somehow have been involved. There was no evidence of it yet, but there was no reason to hold it back any longer.

She glanced at the clock through blurry eyes. A quarter to five. Rey'd called Less and asked him to come to her house at 6:15, about something important, and to pass the message along to Rover. Mizuko, she'd asked to come over at five o'clock, so they could have some time to talk and catch up before the others arrived. Rey stood and started to tidy up the table before her friend arrived.

When a knock came at the door, Rey looked at the clock again — 5 o'clock exactly. She smiled weakly to herself and went to the front door. Before opening it, she looked through the peephole.

Mizuko stood outside dressed in a winter jacket and furry boots, but wearing a knee-length skirt. While Rey watched, she looked around, adjusted how she was holding her grey purse and knocked again, the sound muffled by the black leather gloves she was wearing.

"Hi, Mizuko," Rey said after she opened the door and invited her friend in. In a rare switch, Mizuko was dressed better than Rey was. The Fairest was wearing torn and worn jeans and a sweatshirt that had seen better days, and her feet were clad only in socks which, at first glance, didn't have any holes in them. Rey smiled, truly glad to see her friend, and looking forward to some time simply to chat and forget the pressures of the past few weeks.

Mizuko stopped in the entryway and stared at Rey, then hugged her. It was a lot like hugging a big fluffy pillow since the coat Mizuko was wearing was one of those winter coats that looked like an overstuffed comforter.

Rey stood there shocked for a moment, then returned the hug gratefully. Once she was finally released, she closed the door. "It's good to see you, Miz." The smile on Rey's face was more relaxed, but still weary.

Mizuko's face showed stress and worry. Come to think of it, it was the most humanlike expression Rey had seen on Mizuko that she could ever recall. Then Mizuko looked determined and took a deep breath. She hadn't moved from the entryway, in case she might be asked to leave.

Mizuko balled up her hands then slowly relaxed them. She began to sign. "I'm just going to say something.

I've been fucking that vampire and I like it a lot. I'm going to keep doing it because of that, and also because I like the way he makes me feel. I realize it's shallow and that a person should do it out of love instead of lust. I know it's dangerous, that if a mistake is made terrible things might happen to either one of us, but I'm going to do it anyway. Taking the risk and wanting to be with someone, even if my friends think that someone is a dangerous monster who can or maybe has undermined my will makes me feel like a person. A human being. I don't care if that makes me fucked up. Humans are fucked up, too."

Rey looked at Mizuko, a variety of emotions playing across her face. "Well, you could have said that without the foul language," she finally said with a little chuckle, "The important thing is you're aware of the danger. I've been trying hard since you moved out to be more open minded about Remy. I don't want my prejudices to destroy our friendship."

"Amazing what Glymjack can express," Mizuko signed. She shrugged then signed, "My roommates are former prostitutes."

Then she turned back to the topic at hand. "You don't have to like him or trust him," Mizuko continued. "And I'm not asking you to like my having a relationship with him. I'm just asking you to support me as my friend."

"Of course I do," Rey said. "I won't deny I was upset that you didn't believe me when I first told you what he was. But I trust *you*, and that's what's the most important thing." She didn't add that she felt she had to at least make an effort to trust or like Remy, because the first time Remy did something to harm Mizuko, Rey knew she'd move heaven and earth to make Remy pay for it, regardless of the consequences.

Mizuko let out a breath she'd been holding and smiled a little weakly. She took off her coat and boots (she was actually even wearing socks) and looked around for a place to put them.

"Let's put your coat in the wardrobe, and your boots over there in the corner," Rey said, indicating where she'd recently placed a tray for wet footwear.

Mizuko did so then smiled. She signed, "I keep hoping for snow with big wet flakes that cover everything in a thick blanket of cold snow but all we get around here is stuff that blankets things in the morning and evaporates by afternoon. Depressing."

"That might change once Winter begins its rule," Rey said. "But if you really want to see snow, I should take you to the other side of my little hollow. There will be lots of snow there this time of year." She was almost wistful thinking about it. She missed the pack and her little cabin.

Rey led Mizuko into the kitchen. "So how's working going?"

"I don't mess up as much as I used to, which means I don't have to pay for as many spilled drinks and broken glasses. Because of that," Mizuko signed with a smile, "I have enough to get an actual apartment with Amber. I won't have to sleep on the couch anymore. The shelter is helping us find one. It's not easy, especially since the lease has to pretty much all go under her name and she doesn't exactly have a credit line. More like an arrest record, which isn't as good."

"It's great to hear that things are starting to go well for you," Rey replied, glad her friend has being so successful. "How's Amber doing?"

"She gets by," Mizuko said vaguely. "She's talked about working together again. Not the prostitution racket of course. I don't know what she has in mind. What about you? What have you been doing the past couple months? Other than having sex with werewolves, I mean." She'd said it very poorly, but she could see Rey was tired and that meant she'd been working on something apart from the usual.

Rey laughed. "Nowhere near as much sex as you think," she replied. "I've invested in a restaurant, so there's been a lot of work with that. I've also been doing a lot of research about the carnival, and that's why I've asked everyone to come over tonight. It's got me worried."

Mizuko made the sign for 'okay', accepting that Rey would get to it when the entire motley was here. She watched her friend curiously. The research plus keeping two boyfriends busy must be exhausting, she decided. "What restaurant is this?"

"The Pipe and Fiddle," Rey replied. "A gastropub. They make and serve their own beer, and match it with food that's a higher quality than what you'd normally find in a pub. The owners are looking to expand their current location, and open a new one. They're almost ready to go. The new place should be opening at the end of January. I got involved right near the end, when another investor decided to back out."

Mizuko asked about the details and people involved, the location, and what about it had caught Rey's eye. They talked about that for a while when Rey remembered she had something else she wanted to mention.

"The Mythic City Renaissance Festival holds a Twelfth Night celebration, ending up with a medieval-style feast. I managed to get four tickets, and I was wondering if you might like to come?" Rey asked with a smile. "You're more than welcome to bring Remy, if you like." Her offer was genuine, and she hoped Mizuko could see that.

Mizuko blinked. "Really?"

A wry smile twisted Rey's lips. "Have I ever issued an invitation that wasn't genuine?" she asked.

Mizuko didn't recall ever being invited to something where she could have a guest to bring. She signed, "I don't know."

"Yes, you can invite Remy. I won't be offended. In fact, I really do want him to accompany you, if he's your choice."

"It would probably be Remy that I'd choose over Amber," Mizuko signed, "unless you meant this to be something for the motley to do as a group."

Rey shook her head. "No, just the two of us and our dates."

"A date?" Mizuko signed. From the look on her face, she liked the idea very much. "A double date?" Then she nodded. "I would like to do that."

"I was hoping you would," Rey said, silently relieved.

A little smile tugged at Mizuko's lips.

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Less arrived closer to half past the hour. After the bus had let him off he, perhaps, had paused a bit too long to look up at the dark bulk of Iron Mountain. The memories of the battle with the Goblin King were still fresh in his mind. The air was brisk and the sky clear so he had shaken the mood by the time he reached Rey's house. When she answered the door, he presented her with an inexpensive Chilean red.

Rey stared at the wine for a moment, and a little grimace distorted her face. "I'm afraid I don't have any food made to go with this," she said. "I'll keep it for next time. Or perhaps we may need to drink it when I've finished telling you why I asked you all to come here tonight." She closed the door, cutting off the view of the mountain from her doorstep. "Mizuko's in the kitchen. We're just waiting on Rover."

She walked the short distance into the kitchen and set the bottle down on the counter. "Sorry about the mess." Rey waved a hand at the table. "I've been kind of busy." Less and Mizuko recognized the furniture as new - as was everything in the living room (including a large flat screen tv hanging in the wall). The style was different than she'd had before. Previously, it was mismatched pieces purchased from thrift stores. Now it was all wood, slightly oversized and while obviously sturdy, was elegant and stylish.

Rey's cell phone rang and when she picked it up an angry frown marred her face. It was Chase, and she was in no mood to talk to him. With a flick of her thumb, she sent the call directly voice mail before returning the phone to its spot on the counter.

Rover arrived at last, though it appeared that the gnome's mind was on other matters. He was still determined to make an asset out of the Goblin Staff, but it was turning out to be a most illusive project. At some point he may have to just give up and put together an expedition to the Bloodwort Tree for another seed to use as base material. That was a dangerous prospect, however, and would require the use of non-motley crew members.

Maybe Richard would be willing to accompany him, seeing as how the staff would primary be for his use in fighting the Goblin King.

Once everyone was seated around the table, Rey moved to stand in front of her laptop. "I apologize for the short notice I gave all of you, asking you to meet me here. Something happened on Hallowe'en, and it's not good. Not good at all. I ask that you hold off asking any questions until after I've finished telling you everything, because I want to make sure I don't get sidetracked. Richard and I went to Tyrone Hamilton's Hallowe'en ball, and the entertainment was a carnival." She went on to describe the carnies she'd seen, the doll she'd won, and the House of Haunts. "When I stepped into the House, I was suddenly back in Arcadia, with my Keeper. Or so I thought."

Rey repeated what Mizuko had said about the magic on the tickets and the doll. "We looked around a bit, and found a tattered old poster that said their next stop would be in Huston in 2001. Needless to say, all of this got me very worried. I started looking into Hamilton and the carnival the very next day, and here's what I discovered.

"Hamilton wasn't at the ball. In fact, he wasn't in even in the country for the two weeks before the ball. The carnival, apparently approved by Tyrone, was represented by one Tyrone Fidelius. It took me a while, but it turns out there was a carnival very like the one at the Ball in Houston ten years ago. It was linked to numerous disappearances after it closed. Now the carnival from the Ball has disappeared, and there are reports of many people disappearing.

"Finally, I found a very obscure urban legend attached to the name "Fidelius". The details vary widely, but the general idea is this monster steals away people who are afraid. It's usually the wicked that are taken away to be devoured and their souls sent to hell. However, there are some rumors that anyone who finds Fidelius may enjoy the same fate.

"And that's where things stand. I've got copies of all this information for you guys, if you want it. Less, I have copies made for each of the other Regents, if you would be so kind as to pass along to them, as I don't know an easy way to contact them at all." Rey sighed, the exhaustion and stress of the last few weeks weighing heavily on her shoulders. "I've done all I can do. I wanted to let you know, tell you about it, and then ask if you'll help me, or if we should just let it go. I'm too close to this to make an objective decision."

Mizuko signed, "A secretive creature that probably feeds on fear then. One that discovers what its prey is afraid of using the House of Haunts, and then tracks them down later. I have to think it uses what it learned against them, to produce more of what it wants. I wonder what it does with this. Is fear just food? Does it power some kind of magic? Clearly it must consume people or eventually it wouldn't keep hunting."

"I have no idea," Rey said as she kind of slumped down in a chair. "But back at the carnival, you said my Keeper had been invoked. What did you mean?"

"Even if he wasn't really there," Mizuko explained, "his memory was conjured up, bright and clear and terrifying as saying his name ever could be. If your Keeper was listening, it's possible he could have heard, just like invoking his name might be heard." Mizuko shrugged. "Or so they say. I only repeat popular rumor here."

Rey straightened up in her chair. She was afraid Mizuko had meant something like that. Now, not only was she in danger, but the rest of the motley as well. Maybe she needed to get away from things for a while. Find a place to hole up until she knew more.

"But it's been over a month. If your Keeper was going to drop by, he would have by now, don't you think?" Mizuko tried to reassure her friend.

Rey shook her head. "He loved the hunt, and He rarely, if ever, gave up on His quarry." The memory of him looking at her with such pride, telling her she was to be his next bride, flare brilliant and terrible in her mind. "If he's decided he wants me again..." Her voice trailed off, but she refused to cower and bolt as she had before. Maybe Mizuko was right. Maybe the nightmare was simply that, and it was her own personal terrors that had brought it to life. There was no real reason to believe He would come after her. Was there?

Mizuko broke in on her thoughts. "*Are you okay, Rey?*" she asked in soft tones. Even to Mizuko, Rey looked troubled and the elemental nymph wanted to offer support but she thought holding a hand or an arm around Rey's shoulders would be too intimate. So, she remained distantly concerned.

Rey shook her head. There was no use denying the fear she felt. "He said it was so incredibly easy, that I'd just walked through the door and I was back. He was proud of me, of the fact he'd underestimated me and I'd escaped. His pretty little wolfling had come home, and now he wanted me for his bride." She couldn't suppress the shudder. "I saw a portal back to the carnival and I ran for it." She lifted haunted eyes to look at her friends, her motley.

"It's good that you're safe now," said Less. "You could have come to us before this. We could have lightened the load for you." Rey's news and her obvious fear chilled Less to the bone. Rey was usually the one inflicting fear. "News of another True Fae being attracted to the Duchy will not be welcome news to any of the royal courts," he said. "Frankly, I'm surprised the Autumn Court can offer no hypothesis about a creature that feeds on fear, especially if it has happened before. I assume you consulted with the Houston branch of the Leaden Mirror? You say we're dealing with some kind of human magic. Who has disappeared so far?"

"The list of who has been reported missing is in the books," Rey said, gesturing at the pile of four reports she'd put together. "They didn't start disappearing immediately, though. And there may be others that haven't been reported, or from other cities so the Mythic PD doesn't have record of them. The common link is that they all attended the Hallowe'en Ball." She shifted in her chair, aware of Less' scrutiny. "I didn't say anything earlier because I didn't know if I was completely off-base, or if I had something. After recent events, I didn't want to be crying wolf, you know. My first instinct was to tell Veridia, but I had nothing to substantiate my fears.

"But now I do, or at least enough to present it to you guys. I've exhausted every avenue of research I've been able to tackle on my own. I can't do it all myself. Will you help me?"

Mizuko signed, "I will. You are right in that there is no evidence, no proof there is something that feeds on people's fear. We can't bring nothing to Veridia and expect her to be pleased with us."

Less flipped through the file. It would take a while to sort through all of Rey's work. "Who is this Tyrone

Hamilton anyway? Who throws a public party at their own house and then doesn't show up? Does it seem like too much of a coincidence that the head of the carnival is also named Tyrone?"

Rover remained silent, listening and absorbing what information he could. This sort of thing was truly outside of his expertise. He could look at it as a puzzle, true enough, but the pieces were made up of people. The gnome never did have much luck in understanding people.

He certainly wanted to get a look at that report once Less was finished with it, however. Rover tended to think along odd lines. Perhaps he could spot a connection that might not be immediately obvious to the others. Beyond that, there wasn't much he could do.

"I could have BoBo sniff around the crime scenes. He may not actually have the nose of a blood-hound, but he has been known to pick up on a scent or two in the past. I'm not sure it'd help even if he did find something, but I'm just not sure what else to say."

"Problem is, there's no way to know where the missing people were snatched from," Rey said, "and some of the people have been missing for around a month. I'm surprised, Less, that you don't know who Hamilton is. One of the richest men in Mythic City, somewhat reclusive, hosts the charity ball every year at Hallowe'en. This is the first year it has ever been open to the public. Normally they're much more private affairs."

"The similarity in names between Hamilton and the so-called master of the carnival did not escape my notice, and that is why I looked more deeply into the name Fidelius." She didn't tell them the name sounded very mage-like to her, and was the bigger reason for checking into it.

"So, I guess there is no telling why the disappearances stopped in Houston? Just that everyone who went through the House of Fear disappeared?" asked Less.

"More like everyone who disappeared had gone through the House of Haunts," Rey corrected. "The reporter who wrote the most complete article about it said a dozen people disappeared over a period of three months. The police investigation in Houston wasn't able to go anywhere, really, because the carnival disappeared - until now." A thoughtful look crossed her face. "There was an old X-Files? episode about this guy who'd hibernate for, I don't know, thirty years or something, and before he could go into hibernation he had to eat a bunch of human livers. I wonder if the carnival is like that - it reappears Fidelius has run out of food."

"So we have a clue yet to research," Mizuko signed. "We might assume that those who went missing right away after Halloween might have become food and are now dead. Rey, have you questioned them yet?"

"Ew," grimaced Less. "So, we don't have much to go on besides finding out how Hamilton got them to show up at his house. We don't know who else visited the House of Fear besides Rey so I don't think she should be left alone at all until we figure this out. Is there any where we can go to find out more about human magicians?"

"Rey, you can come stay with Amber and I," Mizuko said. "And yes we can learn more about human magicians. We can just ask the Emerald Queen. She used to have an ensorcelled one in her employ."

"Richard went through the same time I did," Rey said. "Afterwards, he told me I'd been in there for an hour. And I can't talk to the dead, unless they're undead, like vampires." No use in bringing up the fact she used to be able to do it, before she'd been Taken.

Mizuko was insistent. "Sure you can," she signed. "You might not be able to summon one up personally, but I know for a fact you had a ghost sent to find me. I could hear that one just fine."

Rey's phone began to ring, but before she could answer it, Mizuko said, "*That's for me.*" She looked

ashamed. "I don't have the phone you gave me. Like three weeks ago. It got wet."

Rey sighed. "Do you still have the phone? I paid extra for insurance on it, and it'll be easier to get a replacement if I can hand them the dead one. And back to the topic of the dead, I asked Lord Joshua for help and he had the message sent. I wonder if it might not simply be easier to ask him if he will help me learn the basics of that Contract."

Rey retrieved her phone, glancing at the display to see the number of the person calling out of habit as she handed it to Mizuko. It was Chase. "Why is Chase calling you?" Chase was more or less creeped out by her friend, and didn't want to spend a lot of time around her.

Mizuko took the phone as she said, *"We have a mutual interest."*

*"Hello. Yes, Chase. I see. Then it's done? Okay. She said that? I will hold you — and her — to that you know."* She turned off the phone and handed it back to Rey. She picked up as if the phone were no interruption at all and switched back to sign. "The dead phone is at my apartment. I can return it to you tonight if you come home with me."

"As long as you understand I'm coming back here after I get the phone," Rey said. "I have to go to work tomorrow."

Mizuko nodded. *"It should be safe now, unless you count the fact that a supernatural predator from a whacked out Carnival might begin hunting you at any moment."*

Rey's eyes narrowed and her jaw clenched. The stress and lack of sleep over the past five weeks made her angry and reckless, and she knew it. "What are you holding Chase to?"

*"A favor. On the phone he said, 'Lyla and I owe you one'."* Mizuko smiled. *"I know, right? And here I thought I'd end up owing them a favor instead."*

"A favor for what?"

*"It shouldn't be an issue anymore,"* Mizuko stated.

"Damn, it, Mizuko," Rey said, barely able to keep herself from yelling. "Just tell me what this is all about!"

*"I heard about this vampire that took an interest in possessing you and your casino, so told on him to your boyfriend. Say, did you know Chase knows Lyla Clairborne? Turns out a whole bunch of werewolves pounced this guy, not just those two. Anyway, they're pretty sure he's dead now, so that's that."*

Rey stared at Mizuko, then said things that would have made even the most hardened of sailors blush. "A vampire. Wanted me. What the hell is it they want from me? This isn't the first time one of those damned undead parasites..." She shook her head and everyone saw the muscles in her jaw working, clamping her jaw shut. "Of course I know Chase knows Lyla. Lyla wanted to tear him to shreds the instant she saw him, and he nearly got them both turned into evil anti-werewolves," she muttered, and then yelped and shook hands to reveal her fingernails and turned into wicked claw-like thorns and pierced her palms.

Phone still clutched in her bleeding hands, Rey whirled on her heel and stalked to her bedroom, slamming the door behind her. A moment later, there was a loud thwack, followed by a shout of pain.

Less was embarrassed by Rey's fit of pique and glanced around at the other present. Deciding it was his duty, he rose and went to Rey's door. He knocked lightly and talked through the door. "Uh, Rey, I'm very sorry you have been having a hard few weeks, but I really meant what I said about not being alone. There is no telling how the Carnival or your Keeper might make their move. Let us help you. Let *me* help you."

The door opened and Less was met by a very pale Rey, cradling her right hand in her left. "I need to pack a few things," she said, "and then I think we need to stop by an urgent care office. I believe I may have broken one of my fingers."

Rey got a creepy feeling, as if something was watching her through the bedroom window. She whipped her head around, hoping to catch a glimpse of whatever it was before it could hide. She thought she saw movement outside, but she had no idea what it might be. It was just at the edge of her vision.

She turned her attention back to Less and signed (wincing as she moved her right hand) "I'm getting a creepy 'I'm watching you' vibe from something outside my bedroom windows. I can't see it, but I know it's there."

Less gently pulled Rey through the door and away from the windows. While he signed to Rover and Mizuko to have a quick look round the outside of the house, he said out loud to Rey "The stress is making you jumpy. Just sit down while we get ready to go. Try to relax." As an automatic reaction, he put the kettle on while he waited for the others to report back.

"I know, I just..." The image of a very large man came to mind, and Rey found herself wanting to call him, if only to hear his voice. A little smile played across her face, but it faded quickly. "Things have been difficult since Halloween. I admit I took on too much. I did so on purpose, I think."

"You of all people should know better than to avoid your emotions. Your fear." Less watched the kettle listening to the tinny whine of the heating water. "You said you saw your Keeper, that you were back in His domain. That must have been horrible." He would give just about anything to even glimpse the face of his Queen once more, to see the woman who had kept him so long only to cast him off. "But Richard went through behind you but was not confronted with his fears?"

"He saw the battle with the Goblin King again, and we were losing badly," Rey said. "And I wasn't trying to avoid my emotions, except perhaps for one." She shifted uncomfortably, but she couldn't avoid acknowledging it aloud. "Loneliness. I'm used to being with people, my friends. Back home, the pack was always around. I saw them every day. Now the motley is my pack, and I just don't see any of you except, it seems, when there's trouble."

Mizuko had left with Rover to search outside as Less bade her but their search revealed nothing out of the ordinary outside, although it quite dark out now. Clouds had obscured the early stars and brought an early end to daylight. Now even the light from street lamps seemed to struggle to provide more than a dingy yellow pool of light that seemed to barely touch the ground.

Stepping back through the front door, Mizuko reported in sign, "There is nothing, Less. But it is going to be a very black night out there."

Less nodded. He had thought as much. The stress Rey was experiencing was obviously affecting her physically. Changelings were very susceptible to such things. "I will arrange for an audience with the Queen of Spring to find out if these human magicians have some sort of organization, but first I am going to find Richard. He is in danger too. We can figure out how to talk to Mr. Hamilton tomorrow. How are you getting home?"

"The bus," Mizuko reported.

"No," Rey signed, her demeanor a bit happier than happier and less stressed than before. "I think I ought to stay at your place, even if just for one night. I'll drive you." Though they would stop to get Rey's finger looked at first. "I'd better pack now, so we can get out of here."

"Let me help," Mizuko offered. "It will go easier and faster."



With Mizuko's help, Rey packed an overnight bag and got the suit she wanted to wear to work the next day together and laid out on her new bed. The bed, like the other furniture, was elegant but sturdy, with a headboard and a matching night stand. "That all I need, I think, except for my makeup bag in the bathroom. Once I've got that, and made sure my insurance card is in my wallet, I'll be good to go." She looked at her friend.

Less considered the logistics of keeping Rey under surveillance all day. "Did the Houston disappearances happen at any specific time of day?" he asked.

"From what the reporter said in his article," Rey reported, "it seemed they disappeared during the night, up to the hours just before dawn."

"I guess its not worth shadowing you at work tomorrow. Maybe Rover, if you've got time, you could meet Rey after work to escort her home? Are you sure you want to drive all the way to Sante Fe tonight? If something happens Rover and I won't be able to help. Would you feel better staying in the Hollow tonight?"

"No," Rey said with a shake of her head. "Being there puts me one step closer to Him." What she really wanted, she realized, was to be with Richard, but that wasn't likely to happen tonight. "I really need to be somewhere other than here. And not alone. The doctors are probably going to be giving me painkillers. If they affect me like they have in the past, I'll be out like a light once they kick in."

Mizuko hadn't really considered Rey staying at the Hollow. To her, it was a pretty good idea, one she was surprised she hadn't suggested herself. Then again, she'd been avoiding spending any more time than necessary in the Hedge on Veridia's and her motley-mates' recommendation. She now knew very well the consequences of madness and was motivated to avoid that if she could.

Mizuko frowned. "I have to work until close tonight. But you can come with me. It's not a busy night at Corazon."

Rey thought for a moment, then nodded. "Sounds okay to me." She looked down at what she was wearing. "I probably ought to change, though." She turned and walked back into her bedroom to look for something less ratty to wear. After some fumbling around (and a few muttered swear words), Rey returned wearing low riding jeans and a plain tight cherry red t-shirt.

Less looked at her doubtfully. "You are facing possible abduction by an evil carnival or your Keeper, and this is your choice of attire?" Less was even more convinced of her mental instability. He shrugged imperceptibly - there was no changing her mind. "It's a public place, at least. Be very, very careful," he admonished sternly.

Rey's eyes narrowed for a moment, but she didn't say anything. If they were determined to kidnap her, it wouldn't matter what she was wearing. Should it come down to a fight, though, these were clothes she didn't care if they got shredded or bloodied.

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It was some time later when Rover returned to his little shop. It was after working hours, of course, but someone had brought in an old VW Beetle and they'd wanted some rather unusual modifications. On the list were a bigger, more powerful engine (would require removal of the back seats), windows, new front seats and some automated systems the little bug never had before, such as air conditioning. He was standing amid a pile of tools deciding which might be best for the job of cutting a hole in the back of the car big enough to

let the new engine fit when there was a sharp wrapping at his door.

Rover always had liked the Superbugs, he had to admit. Those tough looking, little cars with the big air scoop climbing up over the back window and onto the hood just seemed to out of place on the road. And, naturally enough, the base vehicles were already stripped down far enough that working with the engines was a breeze.

His face creased into a frown when his musings were interrupted. Hoping to get rid of whoever it might be quickly, Rover went to answer the door. A small, paranoid portion of his mind brought him to a halt just before reaching for the door's handle. First he would look to see who it actually was knocking on his shop, then he would think about letting them in.

He lifted up on to the tips of his toes to peek through the window. The window would normally begin a little below the average person's chest and it was tall enough that it went nearly to the top of the door. A Closed sign hung there, so Rover was looking between the bottom of the sign and the bottom of the window. The light outside the door illuminated his visitor quite well.

His visitor had stepped back a couple short paces to allow space for the door to open and waited with bright, hopeful eyes. She was a changeling. He could tell that right off, because no human could be really that hunched. Her back's shape, a result of abuse that had somehow not left her paralyzed restricted her to a height no greater than Rover's own height. Her face carried the scars of lashings and was the pale color of someone who rarely stepped outdoors. She wasn't old, yet her hair had prematurely run to grey — most likely a result of her experiences in Arcadia. In her small, wrinkled hands she carried an odd, mechanical contraption set on a base. A stem that sprouted from it sported dozens of little rotating arms connected to tiny flaps that slowly opened and moved and closed as they rotated. The net effect was a mechanical simulacrum of a living flowers sprouting, blooming, dying and the repeating the entire process over again as if sped up a hundred times faster than real flowers might grow and develop.

"Ah. Hello?" she called.

The changeling held little initial interest to him, but the device she carried drew his attention quickly. It occurred to him that if someone wanted to break into his workshop, all they'd have to do is flash some neat toy before his eyes. There could be an army standing behind the hunchback with her flower and he'd never even notice.

The sounds of locks and bolts behind opened could be heard before the door opened a crack. Rover had difficulty keeping his eyes focused on the woman holding it.

"Ah. Um." The little wizened changeling woman glanced at Rover and then focused on a spot on the ground between them. "I heard you opened a shop a couple... few months back, ah? I wanted to bring you a shop-warming present I made. And to say hullo. Hullo?" She lifted the device higher to hide her shy eyes.

Rover detected a fresh fragrance about her, like new grass or sprouting buds on a tree and realized that the woman was Spring Court. He remembered seeing her before once or twice, though they'd never been introduced.

"Sure. C'mon in." Rover open the door wider to allow the woman entrance. "I think I've seen you at court, right? My name's Rover, by the way."

He wasn't sure how deeply news of his shop ran. It was possible that people were only talking about the business itself and not the owner, so the gnome didn't want to assume that she was aware of his name. This also gave her a polite cue to offer up her own identity.

"Very smooth movement on the flower. I love it. Did you make it yourself?"

She nodded and her eyes sparkled. "I'm Peaches," she said with a bright smile. "It runs on sunlight. If you keep it near a window that sees some sunlight for about an hour a day it will keep working. Ah. Maybe two hours if the day is overcast."

Her eyes focused on the project car and they widened with interested delight. "Aah! Those are so fun to work on! Is it yours? Are you working on it? Ah! May I see?" Her head swiveled left and right spotting his tools, gadgets (and she seemed to take in his wonderful tool belt in a glance as well).

"Sure." He replied, perhaps a little more trusting than he should have been. The flower had captured much of his attention, however, and she seemed to be harmless.

But appearances could be deceiving, especially in their world.

"Please don't touch the new ECM, though. Even with half the electrical system unhooked it's acting buggy. I think there's a short in it, somewhere."

As he spoke, he carefully turned the flower around for surface examination. He was looking for any sort of access plate that could be removed and open up the internal works. With any other gift giver, that would probably be incredibly rude. If Peaches was actually the engineer she seemed to be, though, he was fairly certain she would understand.

He quickly discovered that on the back of the faux "pot" there was a pressure-sensitive door that popped open at his touch. A look inside saw tiny gears and levers whirling and working away. Powering the delicate machinery, which he was sure he could bring to a stop with the slightest of touches, was a little glass box with some kind of viscous fluid in which little balls moved back and forth, bouncing off equally tiny plates. These plates pushed levers, levers rotated gears and so on, somehow managing to use the tiniest energy to move all the parts of the device to emulate blooming, withering, and blooming again throughout the mechanical plant.

When Rover glanced at Peaches, he saw the rear access was open and her head was deep inside the engine compartment. He could hear faint, "Ah!"s and "Oh!"s, but her hands were where he could see them so that he knew she was truly only looking and not touching. By the twitches in her fingers, though, he could tell what she really wanted was to roll up her sleeves and work on the car.

Finally she stepped away and sat on an overturned five gallon bucket. "You have a wonderful shop. Do people come here a lot? Is it distracting? Sometimes distractions are nice though. More projects come up when people come by. I don't have a shop in the mortal realm, very quiet where I work, ah? It's nice too, but I don't see people much. Maybe I should ask for a shop. She looks severe sometimes but she's really nice, our Emerald Queen. I bet she would give me one if I asked nicely."

"She probably could." Rover admitted. "I really don't know that much about her, but she seems to be reasonable. Figure out a way for the shop to work to her advantage, that'll increase your odds."

It was a pretty simple principle of business that people did things for profit, so it never hurt to sweeten the pot. Speaking of which...

"What's this thing filled with?" The gnome indicated the glass box. He tilted it from side to side to see if there was any change in how the spheres were moving. The exacting precision of how it was all timed seemed nearly impossible to him. His own work could seem as delicate when he worked with this level of detail, but what Peaches had put together was just on another level.

That didn't mean it was better than his own work, he had to remind himself. Everyone had their own style, hers just happened to include an element of balance that he'd never seen before. It looked like he could shut

the whole thing down just by turning it in the wrong direction. Yet external movement wasn't proving to be any sort of problem.

"Is it actually defying gravity itself, or is it adjusting to angular changes faster than I can see?"

"Ah!" Peaches left the car and shuffled over to him with a wide smile. She was pleased he wanted to know how it worked. So few changelings out there seemed to care. "It is fluid from a special plant in the Hedge. Bobbleburst. It is a green thing that floats like a balloon with helium in it, but instead of a string it has a thin vine that holds it to the ground. The fluid is quite fascinating! It seems to enable the bulb of this plant to both store energy from the sun and reverse gravity in a highly localized way, ah?"

"I learned of it in the books Queen Ishtar has placed in our new Emerald Library. Ah, she has been collecting books and scrolls on Hedge plants for several years to help with her own garden." It was interesting that the Spring Queen was going by a different name — or maybe it was a title — these days. Peaches continued, "So I harvested a bobbleburst bulb and dissected it. Ah! Careful work. Very careful. They tend to burst and then you have unusable sap all over your face. Makes you feel light-headed. But I got some and I put it in the glass box so it wouldn't float away, and harnessed its power to drive the MFP." It was a cute acronym for Mechanical Flowering Plant. "So many, many useful things in that library. They don't even know! The other Spring Courtiers, ah? They don't realize how many new things might be built using ideas from them. But I do!"

"Ah... and maybe you do?" Peaches looked inquisitively at Rover.

The gnome scowled a bit at the thought. That was a major drawback to his solitary lifestyle; the lack of networking. Nearly all of the information he had to go on was what he could find out for himself. It was easier back when he had the Borrower's Book, as that would allow him nearly unlimited access to any library in existence. Now, however, he would actually have to travel to court and *ask permission* in order to see what might lie within.

Perhaps he could even find information there about how to finish modifying the Goblin Staff? Speaking of which...

Rover closed the plant's access hatch and set it down, carefully, near a window.

"I might." He admitted. "If I ever managed to get some good reading time in. But I'm courtless and haven't actually tried to get inside. But if you have been, would you mind taking a look at another project I'm kicking around? I promise you it's way more interesting than cutting up a VW."

"I could! I could look for you," Peaches volunteered. "It's no bother. The library is free for all Spring Courtiers to use! We can just go- ah!"

"So sorry. Courtless? Well if you don't want to be courtless, Spring would be honored to have someone with your talent and creativity. You make things! New things and better things. You are already just like what all Spring loves anyway." At least, from Peaches' perspective Spring was all about creative solutions. It was at least a different and refreshing take on what was usually considered the court of "desire".

The Courts tended to be rather possessive about who got to use their resources. While Rover had some deals going to get some help in remaking the Goblin Staff into something beneficial, arrangements that meant the Staff would be used for the benefit of the entire Duchy, it might have been nice not to have to resort to deal-making for something like this. Autumn was traditionally a place where arcane and Hedge knowledge was hoarded. Unfortunately, they tended to be very controlling over this information and not being a member of Autumn made access more difficult. Summer wasn't widely known for its libraries, and Winter was new here in the Duchy. That left this new library of Spring as a possible alternative to Autumn. And, it seemed Peaches was extending an invitation to sign up.

Rover shook his head, declining the offer.

"No, that's okay. I like my independence. It seems like any court I was a part of might like to control who I helped and when. If I get approached by anyone, regardless of their affiliation, I'd prefer to be able to help them on my own without it reflecting on anyone else. It's my work and I'll have no one looking over my shoulder, even if that means sacrificing deeper ties.

"But, wait here. The important projects I keep away from the showroom. This shouldn't take long."

He left peaches with the mundane work and headed deeper into his facilities. There was a connection to his main workshop in Less' hollow, and that's where the Goblin Staff was stored, but breaching security with a perfect stranger was simply unthinkable.

In a few minutes he was back carrying the staff. As much of its working were exposed as possible and his own re-modifications stood out starkly against newer veins. He took a moment to explain the history of the device and how it'd been altered.

His modesty prevented him from going into any sort of detail about the raid on his old workshop or what else might have been taken, but he did at least explain that this artifact had 'left his possession' and then had been regained. Not much more than that was offered.

"So what I want to do is convert it from something that creates armies into something that heals large groups of people. I'm missing a core component, though. My current thought is to get my hands on a Bloodwort Seed and have it grow fruit instead of goblins, but the integration is a little more tricky than I thought it was going to be.

"And, of course, I don't want to actually go after the seed until I know for sure that it'll work."

"Ah, tricky," Peaches mumbled. "Very tricky. Repairs to things and repairs to bodies. Similar, but living. Ah! Very challenging. Bloodwort seeds you say? I don't know... I can look it up. I will do that."

She nodded to herself, distracted. "Can I visit in a couple days? I will look for things. Things that might help repair bodies, not things. The library is full of things that are good for bodies, so many things I will have to try to find the best."

"Hey, that'd be great." Rover beamed. "You do that and I will owe you one, big time. Deal?"

Peaches returned his smile shyly. "Ah. If you let me help, can we call it even?"

The gnome stuck out his hand, for once not having to stand on his toes to reach a respectful height in doing so.

She grinned and shook his hand, sealing the deal.

—

Less called up Richard via the contact number he had from back when Dusk and the motley had joined forces, but Richard's voicemail politely informed Less that the person he was trying to contact was not currently available and would he like to leave a message?

Less swore under his breath and immediately dialled Claire. She would know where Richard was.

Claire answered immediately and told him she'd check. A few minutes later she returned his call, saying he

could not be located, but that in itself probably told them that he was with Queen Veridia. He'd been disappearing along with the Queen of Autumn frequently this season, ever since the end of the war with the Goblin King. As Paladin of Shadows, he was her personal bodyguard.

Although Claire didn't know what Veridia was up to or where she was disappearing to, she assured Less that it was not out of the ordinary for Richard to be out of contact when performing his duty as Paladin.

"I hope he is with the Queen," said Less. "He is in danger and being with her is the best place he could be. Please let me know immediately if you manage to contact him."

"I will," she promised. "Can you tell me what this danger might be? Is anyone else in danger?"

"He may be being targetted by a supernatural threat. I don't know what exactly. My motley mate and Witch of the Bitter Wind is also in danger. I don't know if anyone else is in danger, but anyone who attended Tyrone Hamilton's Hallowe'en ball, and especially if they went through the House of Haunts, should not remain alone until further notice. I am sending all the monarchs a brief prepared by Rey herself on the subject. I would appreciate it, Claire, if you could get the word out to the Duchy about this. But try not to incite panic."

"Of course, Highness," she responded. "It would be... sad if there was an overreaction. I will use discretion."

"Thank you, Claire. I haven't had much time lately - since the crowning, actually - but we should talk. Soon. I'll be in touch."

She said her farewell and they disconnected.

—

Rey went with Mizuko first to her apartment where Rey was able to drop off her overnight things, and Mizuko was able to put on her working attire. Amber was there, so Mizuko told her Rey would be spending the night. There weren't any issues.

The apartment was small and had only one bedroom, which Mizuko and Amber shared. They each had nothing more than just a twin-sized mattress set on the floor at the moment, but they appeared to be in the middle of building a loft. Amber told Rey that they planned to put their beds up there and they would use the area under the loft as extra closet space. Right now the loft was partly put together. It consisted mainly of 4x4s, 2x4s, and large bolts. For tools they had crescent wrenches, a drill with large bits and a hammer, but they seemed to be making progress.

After proudly informing Mizuko that she'd landed a job at the same lumber and hardware store from which she'd purchased the parts for the loft, she told her she was going out tonight. Mizuko mentioned that Rey would be going to Corazon with her and asked if she'd join them, but Amber turned down the offer. She was going to connect with some old friends and hit Mythic instead.

Rey didn't feel like taking the bus to get from the apartment to Corazon's, so she opted to drive them there, too. They were about half-way there when Rey caught Mizuko staring straight out the window with a dreamy look in her eyes and a smile on her lips. Mizuko had been quiet both on the trip to her apartment from Rey's house, and now this trip as well. The dreamy look and very pleased smile on Mizuko's face was as out of place as dog riding a donkey.

"Time to come in for a landing, Mizuko," Rey said, wondering what on earth it was putting that expression on her friend's face.

Mizuko looked around with a puzzled and confused expression.

"You had a look on your face like you were flying in clouds of pleasure," Rey replied with a little chuckle. "What, or rather who, were you thinking about?"

Mizuko blushed like a school girl. *"Uh? Ah... oh um. I was thinking about last night."* Remembering what she and Remy had done last night before they got the disturbing news of Rey being targeted by a dangerous vampire had her really worked up — more than she had realized. *"But before I found out about... that thing. The vampire thing. It was a nice night. Very different. Oh! Say, I think I saw you there."*

"Saw me where?" Rey asked, taking her eyes briefly off the road, her attention drawn by Mizuko's voice.

*"This one club I was at. There was a sign with an eye on it and red tears,"* Mizuko replied. *"You were having sex with this guy."*

"Sex. With this guy. Wait a second, were you at Blood Tears, the sex club?"

*"If that was the name of it, then yes. That's what you were there for, too, wasn't it?"*

"I wasn't there," Rey answered with a shake of her head. "It couldn't have been me. I was at home, putting the last of my notes together about the carnival."

*"Are you sure?"* Mizuko asked, as if Rey could possibly be unsure what she was doing last night. *"She really looked a lot like you and I did get a pretty good look at her."* Mizuko shrugged and settled back in her seat. *"Well, I'm glad it wasn't you. I might have had to feel a little awkward about watching then."*

"You watched someone who looked like me, having sex with some stranger. And you didn't think it was weird or out of character for me to be doing that?"

*"No. Well but this guy wasn't a stranger to yo-- I mean to whoever it was there,"* Mizuko said. *"And the room was private. Like a little hotel room. Sort of. Anyway, she got mad and left because he didn't say her name right, I think."* Mizuko thought back on it. She hadn't heard all of it, but she knew that Carson had a thing for Rey — the real Rey. Mizuko decided it wouldn't help anything to tell Rey that, though. *"It was an unusual name."*

Rey frowned. "He didn't call her Honoré, did he?" Her fetch hadn't come to Mythic, had it?

Mizuko nodded, then realized her friend had to keep her eyes on the road. *"Yes, Honor-something, anyway. She looked mortal to me, of course, but I've seen you strengthen your mask before. I wonder who it could be."*

"Did she have any tattoos?"

*"Not that I saw, though I didn't see quite all of her since she didn't discard her dress."*

"Well, it certainly wasn't me," Rey said finally, "and I have no idea who it might be." Daniel, that lawyer back in Eldon Well, hadn't mentioned any siblings when he'd done that search into her background at her request. It was probably a coincidence, or something that Mizuko saw that made her think it was Rey. If Mizuko was in one of those rooms, she was probably rather distracted herself.

Mizuko smiled. Just a lookalike then, she decided.

They arrive at Corazon and Mizuko went to work. Rey spent most of the evening at a remote table, although Alexei stopped by for an hour or so and they made small talk. Mizuko kept a steady supply of drinks of whatever Rey wanted going all night. The nymph seemed to be handling her job better than she had in the

beginning; there were few spilled drinks and she had less trouble figuring out who got what.

After Alexei had to go back to work, Rey called Richard but got his voice mail. The painkiller the doctors had given her had taken effect and she felt more relaxed than she had in weeks. In the message she softly said she missed him and hoped to see him soon, and issued her invitation to be her guest at the Twelfth Night celebration at the Mythic City Ren Faire.

By two in the morning the place was practically empty and Mizuko quickly finished her closing duties. Rey collected her and they left in her car together, heading back to Mizuko's apartment.

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Less was roused from his slumber by the incessant ringing of his phone. A look at a wall clock told him it was nearly 2:30 am. When he answered, he recognized Mizuko's quietly calm voice.

"We have a problem. Rey's gone," she told him.

"What!?! How!?" cried Less.

Mizuko's voice continued with chilly calm. "She was here with me at Corazon's all night. We were closing up and then I was to go home to my apartment with her, when she just stood up, nodded at me, and walked right out the door. I ran to catch up, but she was at the car first. I heard her tell someone that it was okay and that she would sleep on the couch. Only there wasn't anyone there. Then before I could get there, she just drove off! I couldn't catch her. I tried very hard, Less, but there wasn't enough water. There wasn't anything I could do to stop that car. What do I do?"

Less was frantic. "Phone the police!" he blurted. He regretted it immediately - the mundane world would be no match for whatever supernatural power had kidnapped Rey - but he needed eyes out on the road. "Give them a description of Rey's mask, her car, and her license plate if you know it. Tell them she's been abducted. By some guy at the bar, if they ask. Use the phrase 'domestic abuse' or tell them you think he's going to rape her. The police are going to come to talk to you. Rover and I are on our way but try to find some people to confirm your story. Use your voice if you have to."

"Okay, Less," Mizuko said, somehow managing to sound serenely collected, as if this happened all the time. "I will. I'm a block away from Corazon's. You can find me there." She closed the connection.

Forty minutes later, Less had managed to acquire transportation, rouse Rover out of bed, and arrive on the scene at Corazon's. Mizuko was there in her puffy winter coat speaking with a pair of police officers. They were both staring at her intently, almost spellbound in listening to her and staring at her shapely legs. At least the coat was hiding her torso. One had a blank notebook in his hands, apparently forgotten.

"*You already asked me that three times,*" she told the one with the pad of paper.

"I know, but sometimes repeating questions might jog loose a detail you may have forgotten. Don't worry, miss. We've radioed in the report and we have other cars out looking for Miss Lafitte's car. Please stay with me. Now, you said that she got into a car with another man with dark hair. Can you describe him again for me?"

"*Thin. Short black hair, very pale. Handsome in a roguish way. He was wearing a leather jacket and blue jeans. I've never seen him with her before.*"



"Could you identify him in a lineup?" the cop asked.

"Yes. *But I didn't say that.*"

"What?"

"*I didn't literally say she got into the car with the man. You said that.*"

The policeman looked confused. "But you said you saw this man and that she drove off, taken against her will."

"*She was taken against her will, of that I'm sure. But I did not see this man in the car. It was too dark. I could not have seen him in there.*"

"But you saw this man and think he's after her?"

"Yes. *He is definitely after her.*"

"How do you know?"

"*He approached me and asked about her. He wanted to know where she lived, who she was. He has a thing for red-heads.*"

"What did you tell him?"

"*Nothing. I didn't want him anywhere near her. I don't trust him.*"

The cop sighed and realized again he hadn't written what she said down. "It's terribly cold out here tonight. Do you mind if we take this downtown?"

"*I don't want to go downtown. I want to find my friend.*"

"Okay." The cop looked reluctant to let this go. "Look. Do you have identification so we can contact you later?"

"*No. My name is Mizuko Naia. But I don't have identification.*"

He perked up and so did his female partner. They stared at her. "Miss," said the female cop, "I think you need to come downtown with us. We'll get this all straightened out, okay?"

She put a firm hand on Mizuko's arm. Mizuko's eyes shifted to Less and Rover as they approached.

"Mizuko!" called Less. He took in the situation quickly. "I'm glad we've found you." He spoke then to the police officers. "I can vouch for Miss Naia, here. Are you looking for Rey yet?"

The male officer, whose tag read "Sgt. Smith" turned to Less. "A search is underway already, sir. Who are you?"

Less produced his driver's license for Les Seleman and dutifully explained that he was a friend of Mizuko. Now that he wasn't fascinated by the siren's voice, he tried to focus the officer's attention off of them and onto the search for Rey. "Our friend is a smart woman, Sgt. Smith. She may have tried to throw a note out of the car window or something. Have you found anything like that?"

"Nope," replied the officer. "All we have is this lady's testimony." He took Less's driver's license and looked at it.

During the drive down, Rover had been fiddling quietly with a collection of parts that he'd hurriedly thrown into a bag at the last minute. Scanners themselves were made from some fairly basic technology, but getting one's hands on the combs which could receive police band broadcasts was a little more tricky. Those had always been restricted on the open market and a person had to prove the need for one before obtaining it legally.

And that was before the advent of digital broadcasting. Rigging up the proper decoder could also be tricky, but fortunately Rover had been fiddling around with such toys for a while now. It sometimes got under his skin that people thought they could transmit messages right under his nose without him being able to listen in. Though it wasn't exactly an active project of his, he at least had the raw materials laying around that could get the job done.

By the time they arrived on the scene, Less' car had a hastily constructed assemblage of parts that was blurring out voices on a tinny speaker. While not exactly being Dolby 5.1, they could at least hear what was going on. Rover decided to leave the device hidden beneath the front passenger seat as they exited in order to save having to answer any embarrassing questions as to why they had it in the first place.

The radio the officers had suddenly came to life. Sergeant Smith turned his down but they both paused to listen to his partner's radio. Smith looked a little surprised and his partner acknowledged the message. "They found your friend's car abandoned on the sidewalk on Merlot Street up in Mythic City," he said, confirming what they all heard on the radio. "That's MCPD jurisdiction, not SFPD so we'll give them what you told us and see what we can find. It's very late, so why don't you folks go home and get some sleep. If you think of something that might help, give us a call. You have the number?"

Mizuko nodded and held up the card they'd given her earlier. They nodded to her and then retreated toward the patrol car parked across the street. Mizuko put the card back into her coat pocket and took a step toward Less so they could leave. Then she froze, staring at something down the sidewalk behind them. Her eyes were wide in surprise and her mouth slightly open as if taken completely off guard. It was a sharp contrast to her formerly icy-cool demeanor when talking about Rey's abduction.

About half a block away, standing just inside the circle of light from a streetlamp, stood two men. Both were about the same height, though their looks were almost the complete opposite. One man wore a well tailored overcoat, his dark hair brushing his collar. The other man was younger than the first, with blonde hair cropped short, and his athletic build was set off by his tight leather pants and leather jacket. The dark-haired man held out a hand and smiled at Mizuko.

Mizuko knew that face anywhere. She blinked and raised her hand in greeting as well, simply too surprised to move.

The dark-haired man smiled and shook his head as he casually closed the distance between them, the blond walking close behind. "Good evening, *ma petite*," he said, lifting her hand and placing a kiss on her knuckles. The blonde watched with a bemused smile on his face.

Mizuko blushed deeply as her body reacted to his touch. Hormones raged wildly in response to her reaction to the man who'd made the previous evening a night she'd never forget. As Remy fulfilled his promise and she gained a little rush of Glamour in response, she felt her legs weaken. She recovered from the swoon by pretending to do a small curtsy and hoped no one noticed.

She managed a less than eloquent, "Um."

His smile was indulgent. "Perhaps you should introduce us to your friends."

"Less, Rover, this is Remy and Carson," she said briefly and without taking her eyes off Remy. She followed it by saying, "You changed your hair color, Carson. Good thinking, since I gave your description to the police right over there." She finally managed to drag her eyes away from Remy to look at Carson. "I do apologize for that by the way. I don't lie, and although you probably didn't do it, you could have done it and I needed the police to start looking. Will you forgive me?"

Carson frowned. "It's not possible for your friend to be kidnapped, and for me to have done it. I was with her until about a half hour ago, at her place."

Mizuko blinked in astonishment. "How did you know I had a friend kidnapped?"

"I have friends in the Santa Fe police department," Remy replied. "I asked them to keep an eye out for certain things, and they called me. I came as quickly as I could, to see if there was a way I could help."

Mizuko looked at Rover and Less, then back at Remy. "We appreciate that. Let me clear something up first, though. Carson, you were not with my friend. First of all, she goes by Rey. Secondly, she has tattoos. I admit there is a remarkable resemblance, but your girl is someone else."

She took a breath and stepped so she could address all the men gathered. "She was kidnapped but not by anyone I could see in the car. She left without me. She would never do that without a word. I heard her say she would sleep on my couch but she was talking to thin air. I think she thought I was with her, so she left. But something's very wrong. Now her car is found abandoned? On a sidewalk?" She shook her head. "This is just like what's been happening to the others. The ones that Rey has been researching."

"Less." She took hold of Less's arm and looked him straight in the eye. "I have a very bad feeling about this."

In June, Mizuko had said the same thing. At that time, three of her then-closest friends had been kidnapped by a maniac bent on dissection. The motley had played it safe, taking time to research and track and prepare. Two of her three friends had been mutilated and killed in the worst imaginable way. One had been saved, but it was hard to forget that while her friends were dying, Mizuko had had a terrible feeling about it, one she'd expressed but hadn't pushed.

She was pushing now.

Carson's frown deepened. "Do you have a picture of your friend?" he asked.

"Carson, this is something that can be sorted out later," Remy said firmly. "Mizuko's friend must be found, and quickly. It can't be Leopold, so it has to be someone else."

Carson nodded. "I have a couple ideas. Let me get working on it. If I find out anything, I'll let you know." He turned and left at a deceptively sedate walk.

Mizuko let go of Less and watched Carson go for a moment. Then she said, "I feel like I should have told him she might have been taken by a creature we suspect feeds on fear and can completely displace a victim's reality with one of its own design." Her eyes flicked back to Remy. "If he manages to find her, please do him a favor, Remy. Do not let him face this thing alone. Let us handle it. She's one of us, she's our friend; it's our risk to take." The nymph looked to her friends to back her up on that.

Less guessed this man Remy, and probably Carson, too, were vampires. He stared at them, trying to wrap his mind around the concept. It was one thing for Rey or Mizuko to talk about these fanged monsters and another thing altogether to make polite acquaintance with them. He made an effort to be polite as they were friends of Mizuko and were clearly intent on helping to get Rey back.

Less offered Remy one of his cards, and saluted him with a nod. "This has my cell number, if you need to reach us. I'm afraid you'll have to excuse us, we are in a hurry." He took Mizuko's arm as he addressed her. "I've borrowed the Sergeant's car. We must get back to Mythic immediately."

Remy slipped a cell phone out of his pocket and slipped it into Mizuko's hand. "Keep this on you so I have an alternate way to get in contact with you should Carson find anything."

Mizuko looked at the phone, then nodded. She put the phone in her pocket and let Less lead her away. She waved goodbye to Remy, then got in Less's borrowed car with he and Rover. After they got moving, Mizuko asked, "*What is our first move? Go to where they found Rey's car?*"

Rover had no better suggestions than that at the moment. Did did, however, retrieve his cobbled police scanner and began moving through the frequencies. They could always try to track from the vehicle itself, or backtrack it if they thought the car had been abandoned as a diversion.

Unless they were lucky enough to hear one of the official investigators broadcast something new, he was stuck for ideas.

The scanner fuzzed to life as Rover discovered the current emergency and police channels currently in use. They heard police reporting that the car, belonging to one Rey Lafitte had been found up on a sidewalk. The front passenger quarter was crushed and there was some damage to a brick face of a store front but their didn't appear to be any injuries. The airbag in her car had been deployed, but there was no sign of blood at the scene. The driver's side door had been left open, but there was no obvious indication anyone else was in the car. It had a passenger side airbag, but it was not deployed — the car had a sensor in the passenger seat that would only allow those bags to deploy if it was occupied. Therefore, they were reasonably sure no one had been in the front seat with her. That didn't rule out someone in the back, however.

Another officer asked over the radio if this Rey Lafitte was any relation to the police consultant, Marie Lafitte but the only response was that they thought it was the same person. After a minute of confusion, however, they established that Rey and Marie Lafitte were two different people with different residences.

Mizuko pointed out that there will probably be cops at the scene until a wrecker comes. Maybe some kind of forensics team and police detectives, too. She suggested they park out of the way somewhere. No sense in getting in their way, she said.

"*I have a way to track Rey,*" Mizuko put in. "*It's possible we could move on this and find her much sooner than the police.*" Mizuko turned to Less. "*With your permission, I will set it up and take the needed precautions.*"

Less didn't like it. He'd witnessed the price she had to pay the last time she used her magic for something like this. He bit his tongue, however. He just didn't have any other suggestions and they were desperately short on time.

Mizuko nodded, then plucked the cell phone Remy had given her from her pocket and used it to call him. He must have answered quickly because she said, "*Remy, I could use your help. I will find Rey, but it's possible I could be rendered... not useful to her rescue once I give my friends the information. I need a place where I can't hurt anyone. A place I will be watched. Can you provide this for me?*"

She paused and listened to his response, then looked around until she spotted a street sign and a building number. Then she gave him the address. She paused again and said, "*I will see you soon.*"

"*He will be here in fifteen,*" she told Less and Rover. "*I'm using the divining spell once more. Last time, Less, you had to take care of me after and we cannot afford the distraction this time. Once Remy arrives, I'll give you what you need from the spell and if I lose my mind, Remy will make sure I don't do anything... too*

crazy." Her calm expression cracked. Worry creased her brow and tears blurred her eyes. *"Less, I'm really worried for Rey. I feel like we are losing her. I don't think should wait, or there might not be anything left to save."*

"I think you may be right," said Less. He looked at her with deep sympathy. "You are very brave to do this, thank you."

Through the worry, Mizuko managed a small smile for Less and Rover, then set about mentally preparing herself for what to come. Once Remy Deprez arrived, things would happen quickly.

A nondescript black SUV pulled up behind the motley, and even before it had parked, the front passenger door opened and Carson stepped out. He was wearing what he had on before, but was carrying a backpack over one shoulder. A moment later, Remy got out from behind the wheel. With precise steps, he rounded the vehicle and came to stand next to Mizuko. "We offer Carson's assistance tonight."

"With Mizuko unavailable," Carson said, his voice firm and business-like, "you are going to be down one pair of hands and a set of senses. If it is one of our people, then all the more reason for me to be helping."

Mizuko twitched at the thought. One of their people? She inwardly hoped that was not the case. She closed her eyes and bowed her head toward Remy and Carson, then turned to face Less and Rover. She drew in a deep breath, then formed her thought in preparation to call upon the magic of Faerie. When she was ready, she cast forth a single question. *Where will we find Rey?*

The answer flowed through her and she shuddered. Her eyes flew open and she spoke, *"You will find Rey Lafitte lying upon the floor in the attic of an old house, number 10316 Ronin Street of this city. I see her. Something has her. Something from beyond our worlds."*

She then seemed to droop, her eyes staring at nothing, as if someone had flicked her off switch.

"Go," Remy said. "I will look after Mizuko."

Carson looked at the car Less had borrowed. "I think we will need the SUV, Remy. Will that be a problem?"

Remy shook his head. "Take it. I'll have another car come for me."

Mizuko slowly raised her head and looked around at each of Less, Rover, Remy, and Carson but made no other move. Whatever was going on in her mind, she was providing no clues at this time, and right now the others had move if they were going to save Rey before she was irreparably damaged, or killed.

"I'm finished work," Mizuko said, startling Rey a bit. Rey's mind had wandered, thinking back to what she'd experienced in the House of Haunts. Was everyone who went through there allowed to escape, and then Fidelius hunted them down afterwards? She nodded at her friend and stood, striding quickly to her car outside.

"We don't have a bed for you to sleep in." Mizuko looked at Rey with that enigmatic face of hers.

"That's okay," Rey replied. "I'll sleep on the couch." She slid into her car and after her friend was buckled in, drove off. Mizuko was never very chatty, so the drive was very quiet.

The closer they got to the apartment, the more unsettled she became. Rey turned her head to glance at Mizuko before asking her about it when she saw her friend wasn't there. At that very moment, she realized

there was someone - or something - in the back seat of her car.

"What the..." She looked behind her just in time to see skeletal hands reaching for her. Rey slammed on the brakes and tried to swerve, hoping to send the thing flying but it didn't so much as shift an inch. Her heart racing, she drove the car up onto the sidewalk and leaped from the car an instant before it touched her.

Rey looked around frantically, wanting to escape, but knowing that if she lost it completely, it might go after someone else. She darted down the nearest alley then looked back over her shoulder. A thrill of terror raced through her when she recognized White Hands, one of her Keeper's best hunters. He never failed in catching and returning escaped Changeling.

Any thought of escaping into the Hedge disappeared. There, White Hands would have the advantage, and like she'd told Less, being in the Hedge put her one step closer to her Keeper. Her feet beat the pavement faster, but no matter how fast she ran, how many twists and turns she took, White Hands was always right behind her.

She kept running, but soon she discovered she was lost, and it seemed like almost every turn she took was a dead end, forcing her to backtrack and letting White Hands get that much closer. No matter what she tried, she just couldn't get away, and now she was tiring, her breathing labored, but she kept running. She'd sworn she'd die before she would be taken back to her Keeper.

More twists and turns in the back alleys and Rey lost all idea of what direction she was going. All she knew is she had to keep moving. She turned a corner and found it was another dead end, and she nearly let out a scream of despair until she saw a door, hidden in the shadows. She pounced at it, and after a short struggle, ripped it open and dashed through.

The crumbling walls and rotten wood quickly gave way to stone and paneled walls. Rey skidded to a halt. The room was familiar, like something buried deep in one of her nightmares. She looked around, trying to find an escape route but the door behind her vanished. She was trapped.

"You're home again, my pretty little wolfling."

She spun in place and there He was, dressed the same as the day he Took her. Rey froze in place, the old terror washing over her. No, not again. Her anger exploded into rage and she launched herself at him with a scream that tore at her throat. With a casual backhand, he sent her flying back across the room. The right side of her face hit the wall and for a moment, all she could see was stars.

"That's not very ladylike, my future bride. What a horrible way to act in front of our guest." He took a step aside and suddenly Rey could see Mizuko, disheveled and unconscious, slumped in a chair. "I decided to bring a friend for you, someone to act as your handmaid."

Rey's breath caught in her throat. Handmaid. Dear god, no. In her Keepers house, handmaids were the bride's whipping boys. If Rey fought back, if she so much as stepped one hair out of line, Mizuko would be punished for it.

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"I know the place Mizuko told you about," Carson said. "It will be difficult, likely dangerous, simply to get into it."

"Luckily, I came prepared for that." Rover replied. He'd brought along a shotgun much like he'd used during the assault on Circledell. It was a simple affair but reliable, and he was already working on making his minor adjustments as they drove. Hopefully he would be fully lethal by the time they arrived.

"And I'll be riding BoBo for mobility while we're there. It sounds like we'll have to move fast and hit hard, right?"

"The address Mizuko gave us is the safe house of a vampire," Carson said, "one that could be described as Remy's archenemy. There will be traps, guards and other dangers, so a balance of caution, speed and deadliness will be required."

During the ride to the vampire's safe house Less silently worried about their new companion. They knew nothing about him or his values. Mizuko seemed to trust him and that was good enough for now, but hadn't they discussed something about Carson being with a Rey look-alike earlier this evening? It was an oddity that didn't sit well with him.

"I suspect you've never had to gain entrance to a vampire's safe house," Carson said conversationally as he drove. "It can be anything from a place that is considered disposable, something we have set up to lose should it be discovered, to a hidden armed fortress. I do not believe it will be the latter."

"That said, many dangers we might face might not be things that can be faced with a gun. Security systems, both mundane and magical are a possibility, traps and guardians both living and otherwise." Carson glanced at Less and Rover for a moment before looking at the road once more.

"Considering the connection with the magical carnival, I am expecting we will face magic. Though, I admit I am surprised that vampires are involved in this. Mizuko told us that the magical signatures in the Carnival were from mortal magicians. Though, I suppose it is to be expected that the two groups would associate."

Carson thought about Less' words for a moment. "Why would you expect it?"

Less was only going by what he'd seen in movies. "Well, only because I imagine human magicians to be hungry for occult knowledge and immortality. Vampires would be a good source for those things and the humans could provide blood or protection. It seems like a good move, politically."

"It is my experience," Carson replied, "that people, regardless of who or what they may be, are rarely willing to share their secrets."

"No sharing, true," replied Less. "But for the right price a deal could be made. If a magician desired a secret badly enough, a vampire might get a good price."

"There is one slight problem with that theory," Carson said. "The vampire whose safe house this is is dead."

Less was a bit confused. "You mean...more dead. Permanently dead? Or rather, permanently not...functioning? I thought this was the house of Remy's arch nemesis or something? Whose safe house is it?"

"As in destroyed, never to come back," Carson said. "He was believed to be a threat to your Rey, and her rather powerful werewolf friends eliminated him. And the safe house is his. Remy thought that whatever plans his enemy had were stopped. It is unclear if the kidnapper's use of the safe house is a coincidence, or it is the result of some plan that had been put into motion before he was taken out."

It seemed that Rey had been keeping a lot more secret than just her illegal business dealings. "Why was this vampire after Rey? Could her kidnapping simply be a posthumous fulfillment of his plans by his followers? Or was he behind the man Fidelius and his Carnival?" Less was mostly musing aloud, but hoped all the same that his questions would be answered.

"Your guess is as good as mine," Carson admitted.

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Rover, Less and Carson approached the building on foot after parking Remy's SUV. It looked creepy; a real, classic haunted house. The white paint was peeling from the old, grey wood, the windows were boarded up, and it was only two stories tall and possibly cellar. The lawn was just scrawny, rough weeds and rocks and the path to the front door was just a dirt trail. The front door still looked solid enough, and there were no lights or anything else to indicate someone was there or that it had been occupied for some time.

"This looks promising," Carson said with an odd cheerfulness.

"I can get us inside," said Less. "Can anyone sense any magical protections?" he asked as he adjusted his cap and tapped his umbrella on the sidewalk.

Carson shook his head. "Not my area of expertise."

Less assumed Rover would have nothing to add on the subject and pulled his sword blade free of its umbrella sheath. "I guess we'll just have to be prepared, then." He nodded up the over-grown path, so much like a path beyond the Hedge. "Shall we?" Invisible to Carson, his many eyes snapped open and swivelled around watchfully. The Winter King stepped onto the creaking wood boards of the porch steps, opened the screen, and then tapped just a little bit of magic to cast a little spell he knew by way of a goblin contract. The lock turned and even the knob of the door twisted. The door opened and swung inward with a scratchy whine.

In a few blinks, Less's eyes adjusted to the dim interior and took in the immediate situation. For one thing a spring-loaded arm that was intended to close the door automatically was disengaged. A spring-loaded mechanism was rigged to the fire the core of the lock clean through and probably into whatever unhappy thief might have tried the lock. Now safely inside, with the door held open, Less also spotted the reinforced steel door frame and an unloaded crossbow lying in a chair about ten feet from the door. Apparently, they hadn't rigged the weapon yet.

Beyond the entryway, there were several options. Directly ahead were uncarpeted stairs up to the second floor. To the left was a dining room and adjacent kitchen. To the right was a living room and a dark hallway leading elsewhere.

So far, there was no sign of life.

Carson looked at the setup on the lock and the crossbow and couldn't help but approve of the measures. Silent or nearly so, and potentially deadly. Not what he would have chosen, but effective nonetheless. He carefully scanned the house from the doorway, looking for signs of other traps or alarms.

The un-rigged crossbow made Less' hair stand on end. They had been lucky so far but they needed to be extremely careful from here on in. Hopefully Rover would be able to spot suspicious mechanical trouble. The fact that the crossbow wasn't yet set up suggested the place was still being used, or perhaps the owner was planning to be gone (or settling in for a nap?) and wanted additional security. The stairs were inviting since Rey was supposed to be in the attic, but if the house was occupied he didn't really want to get trapped upstairs by something they missed on the ground floor. Less assumed their vampire companion would be the most likely to survive these little booby-traps. "Carson, you go first," he whispered. "Quietly now, wait in the living room there and see if you can see anything down the hall. We'll follow and glance in the kitchen."

Carson gave Less an almost mocking little bow before cautiously walking into the living room. He skirted the edge, looking at the walls and ceiling. Satisfied there was nothing to be concerned about, he backed up toward the center of the room and onto the carpet. He was just about in the center of the room when he felt the carpet give way beneath his foot. Before he could catch his balance, he fell through the floor with a soft "damn", followed by a sickening crunch and an "ow, fuck that hurt".



"Shit!" said Less quietly to Rover. "This place is riddled with traps." He waited a moment, looking at all the access points for a response to Carson's fall, before hurrying across the threshold to the edge of the hole. He peered over the edge. "Carson? How bad is it?"

"I've had worse," Carson said just loud enough for the changeling to hear. "As soon as I find the stairs I'll rejoin you."

"Don't." Rover warned. "I think this was meant to split us up. Any exits you find will probably just take you further away from us. Either we should get you back up or come down there and join you..."

The gnome began scanning the room in search of anything he could make into a rope.

"There might be a tablecloth in the dining room," said Less, turning to look past the entrance-way. "Or just more traps." Less slipped his naked blade back into the umbrella to free his hand and to give him something to prod the floor ahead of him. "Keep an eye out for me," he asked Rover as he carefully moved into the dining room watching for trip-wires and the like. The way seemed blessedly boring. Nothing fell on him, shot at him, or dropped him through the floor at any rate, and he was able to retrieve the ratty old table cloth without trouble.

Carson did not wait for Less and Rover to come up with a solution. There was a lady to be rescued, and every minute counted. Looking around the basement he found a flight of stairs leading up to a door. Before climbing the stairs, he checked them for signs of traps or tampering. Sure enough, while the first two steps were fine, the next three had been weakened, designed to break when stepped on.

A simple application of his power and Carson easily leaped over the damaged steps and stopped short of the door. If the stairs were booby-trapped, then it would only be logical the door was as well. An examination of the door revealed no evidence of traps or tampering, though the door opened away from him and there could be something on the other side of the door. Given the fact he fell through a hole in the floor above, he figured it was unlikely the weakened steps were there to catch someone trying to leave the basement but geared for someone come down them from upstairs. Chances were good, he hoped, there was nothing on the other side of the door that would go boom.

With a quick, decisive twist, he ripped the doorknob off the door. With a swipe of his finger, he popped the bolt free and opened the door. Carson then found himself at the back of the kitchen, not far from the others. There was a kitchen door here as well, out of sight from the front rooms. He noticed the door had been hastily, sloppily left ajar, though the screen door was closed. Black marks, possibly left from dragging the heels of shoes, on the tattered linoleum floor trailed off to the left, toward unseen rooms and the carpeted hallway. He knew that direction would lead him back into the living room area with the hole in the middle of the floor.

Meanwhile, Less had to tear his eyes away from watching Rover braid strips of tablecloth and curtain into a tight rope. The motions of his hands and fingers were mesmerizing but Rover insisted that he watch anything - everything - else but him. Suddenly, there was a crash and a bang from the kitchen. His blade instantly shot out and hurried the few safe steps to the dining room to meet this new threat.

Carson stepped into the entrance to the dining room. "Whoever brought Miss Lafitte here dragged her in through the kitchen," he said softly. "We need to get upstairs, and fast."

"Do you think they went up these steps?" asked Less as he eyed the old staircase dubiously. They seemed far too convenient for this hive of booby-traps.

"Unless there's a secret staircase somewhere," Carson's tone indicated he didn't think it likely, "that's the only way up. Unless you want to scale the outside of the building or fly in through a window." He moved to the bottom of the staircase and looked at it to see if he could spot anything untoward. It seemed safe enough

to him.

"All right, I'll give it a try," said Less. He reassembled his umbrella and opened it. Normally sure to bring bad luck, he trusted the Hedge Token to make his steps as light as a feather. A brisk wind stirred up apparently from nowhere, allowing him to drift rapidly up the stairwell. He settled at the top and with a quick look he noted there were several closed bedroom doors. More interesting was that stairs up to the attic had been pulled down.

Carson watched Less' ascent in fascination. "What an interesting umbrella," he murmured.

"No sign of any dead-falls," Less called down the stairs. "There's access to the attic, though."

"Then what are we waiting for?" Carson bounded up the stairs and toward the attic access, intent on rescuing the damsel in distress.

"You, clearly," muttered Less as he stood aside for the charging vampire.

The attic was utterly dark. Carson heard very weak moaning sounds coming from somewhere ahead of him in the blackness.

Following Carson, Less stood on the the ladder with his head and shoulders in the inky darkness. He dug his phone out of his pocket and snapped it open hoping the amount of light emitting from the tiny screen would be just enough to see.

The little light seemed bright as a flashlight in the darkened attic. As he rotated it, an image appeared of a shadowy creature bent over Rey's still form. Tendrils extended from smoky limbs and penetrated Rey's skull. As he watched, the tendrils seemed to pulse, drinking something formless away from Rey. Rey shuddered and jerked. Less noticed her hair was drained of color and her face pale.

The creature looked up toward the source of the light and hissed, revealed white, needle-like teeth and red eyes.

"I hate spirits," Carson muttered. He took a step to the side, clearing the way for Less and Rover to enter the attic easily, and a knife appeared in his hand. A moment later, the blade appeared to shimmer, then became hazy, like being viewed through faintly frosted glass. He continued to circle around to one side, hoping to force the spirit to split its attention between him and the others.

Less clambered up into the attic and stood crouched below the sloping roof. He was horrified by the scene before him. All he could manage while Rover entered the attic was to keep the light focused on the awful creature draining the life from Rey. *How does one fight a spirit?* he asked himself. Carson seemed to have some knowledge of them, so maybe vampires could hurt them. He had to do something to help Rey, he knew, but what? The only thing that sprang to his jangled mind was that the creature was supposedly feeding on fear. He could also feed on fear, so maybe he could interrupt the spirit's meal.

Less banged the tip of his umbrella down hard on the floor. It boomed loud and hollow like a drum. He reached out with his fae self and tried to grab Rey's fear, and by doing so distract the spirit's attention away from her. But, it remained out of his grasp. Her emotions, like that of any fae, could not be tapped. They were... too second, hand. Perhaps too unreal. Whatever the case, he simply could not do it.

Yet, there was a buzz of glamour, energy from his umbrella when he thumped it on the floor. The sensation was unfamiliar yet not unwelcome, similar to a nudge a favored but concerned pet might give his master in

the face of a possible threat.

With eerie silence, Carson stepped up and with a tight movement, attacked the spirit. The blade of his knife left behind a trail of mist when it sliced through one of the tentacles sucking Rey's life away.

Emboldened by Carson's success in fighting the creature with a knife, Less drew his sword once again and closed the distance to the monster. However, he still felt that a creature so dominated by emotion must be affected by emotion. Perhaps this thing, fed only by fear, could be forced to stop if flooded with sorrow. Less gathered the fleeting power of Winter and forced the creature to dwell on a sad memory of its former life. He felt great resistance to his use of the power and but sensed that his attempted manipulation enraged the creature. It ripped free a couple more finger-like tentacles from Rey's head and thrust them toward Less. Less noticed these shadowy fingers swept well clear of his blade.

Carson wanted this fight over, and fast. They had no idea how much longer Rey would last, but he knew how unhappy Remy and Mizuko would be if he and the others failed to save her. He focused his attention and attacked again. This time his blade went deep into the spirit's form. It shrieked and it was more of a mental blast of rage than sound.

Less, though encouraged by getting the attention of the spirit, decided he needed to act to help his fallen Motley member. He viciously slashed at the shifting, ghostly forms of the tentacles attached to Rey. His sword savaged the creature's connection, cutting it from Rey completely. Her body convulsed and then she lay still on the floor like a marionette whose strings have been cut. The creature shrieked again and recoiled.

It bled a ghostly, pale steam from the knife wound it had sustained and tried to avoid the vampire. It didn't like being cut from its food source, but it hadn't had any luck breaking through Less's mental defenses a moment ago. So, it shifted its attention to the vampire and suddenly sprouted a dozen new ghostly tentacles from the black mass of its body and launched them in a new attack upon the vampire's mind. Carson managed to avoid or bat away most of the assault, but one black finger-like tentacle connected with his forehead. He went rigid as he imagined himself falling through the floor.

Less' chest seemed to freeze solid when he saw Carson go down. If Rey hadn't also been lying at his feet, he would have fled the attic forever. Desperate to protect himself from the spirit's tentacles he chopped and stabbed at the dark form. A wild roar emitted from his throat, unbidden, as he drove himself to the utmost. The Winter King's onslaught tore into this creature. His sword cane, seemed to have considerable effect, or perhaps the creature was particularly vulnerable to it, but either way the results were remarkable. Smoky tendrils were severed completely from Carson and the creature's body seemed to writhe in agony. It cast about looking for some escape.

Carson was disoriented for a moment, then let out a low growl as he attacked the spirit again. His knife bit into its ghostly flesh. The creature didn't have much fight left in it and Carson's damage caused nearly all its vapor-like form to dissipate. It screeched and faded until it was only a pair of malevolent eyes, then faded away.

The nightmare was over.

Carson spared a glance for Less and Rover, but his attention was for Rey. "Incredible. She looks so much like Marie," he murmured, then he grinned. "Time for a prince to wake Sleeping Beauty." With a small flourish, he leaned over and pressed a kiss to the Changeling's lips.

She started, then let out a scream of terrified rage. Her hand lashed out and she raked Carson's face and left three deep bloody gashes behind. Rey rolled to her feet and backed away, crouched in a defensive posture. Her eyes were wild, the intelligence normally there replaced with monstrous instinct.

Carson stumbled back. The attack, let alone the damage she caused, was unexpected. He looked at her

hands and saw nothing that possibly have gouged his face. The vampire kept his distance and returned his knife to its hidden sheath.

"Rey!" cried Less. "Thank the stars! You're alive!" He let both sword and umbrella sheath fall from his hands as he approached her, arms open to receive her.

Rey backed up a step and snarled, revealing a mouth full of razor-sharp teeth. As Less continued to approach, awareness of her true surroundings returned. Her eyes cleared and instinct gave way to recognition. "Less?" she whispered, her complexion pale behind the evidence of her car crash marring her face. The last surge of terror-induced adrenaline that had powered her brief actions now faded and she collapsed into a heap where she stood.

Less knelt next to the flowering beast girl and gathered her torso up off the cold and dusty floor. "You're safe now, Rey. It was all a dream. Your motley is here. We'll take care of you." He murmured to her softly, reassuringly as he tried to keep her warm. He looked up at Carson, who was staring in shock at his stolen prize. "Ask Rover to whip up a litter for her. And clear the rest of the house of booby-traps."

"I can carry her," Carson said immediately, "providing she won't try to take another piece of me. It'll be easier to get her down the stairs in someone's arms."

Rey stirred. "No litter," she said weakly. "Just get me out of here. Get me home." She turned her head and and Less could see the haunted look in her eyes. "Is Mizuko okay? Did he get her too?"

Less allowed Carson to take Rey from him. "Mizuko is fine," said Less. Rather, she would be faring as well as could be expected given the toll she paid for her faerie magic. "She told us where to find you."

Rey's reply was a silent nod and her eyes fell closed once more.

Carson carried her down the stairs to the main floor. "Was there anything you wanted to do about this place?" he asked as he headed out the front door toward the SUV.

Less turned back to look at the house. His eyes were drawn to the roof-line, below which they had just fought off a dangerous spirit. "Just make it safe for the squatters or city workers that will eventually show up. I'd love to know why that thing brought Rey back to the safe-house of Remy's arch-nemesis vampire, especially now that this vampire is no longer. What was their connection? And why Rey?" He turned back to face Carson. "I suppose there is no way to know that now."

"Probably not," Carson agreed. "Unless you're able to find someone who can divine things from the past, or can summon and speak to spirits or destroyed vampires. I don't know if that's even possible."

Less dug out his cell phone and dialed Claire. It was extremely early but he felt she would understand the circumstances.

She answered and her tone was the same as when he'd called earlier, as if being active at five in the morning was normal. Then again, she was a darkling; there powers were greatest at night and weakest during the day. It was possible this really was her most active time.

"Claire, it's Less calling. We found the Witch and she is safe now. I think the threat has been dealt with, but I'd like to be sure. Has there been any word from Richard?"

"No, Highness. I have received no word on his location or safety. I just left Iron Mountain, in fact, to search personally in the Hedge in that area. So far, the Autumn Queen has eluded our ability to locate her. I suspect she and her paladin may be at a private hollow, which may be nearly impossible to locate." She paused, then added, "Or she may be in her motley's hollow. Either way, it is not accessible to the Wardens."

"Okay, thank you. Perhaps Rey will have more to add once she is feeling up to telling us about what happened. Let me know if you find or hear from Richard." Less ended the call and caught up with the others at the car.

Carson finished buckling Rey into her seat. "Where shall we take her?"

"I'm going to take her home," said Less. He knew of Rey's poor opinion of vampires. She probably wouldn't be too happy to drive one to her house. "It's probably best if *you* find your way back to Santa Fe and report back to Remy and Mizuko." He extended his hand. "Thanks for your help, Carson. Don't take this the wrong way, but I hope we don't need it ever again."

Carson took Less' hand and shook it. "I'll drive you back to your car, then," Carson replied, the bloody gashes Rey had torn in his cheek gone as if they'd never happened.

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Despite the nap Less took on the way back to Sante Fe in Carson's SUV, he now blinked against the grit of exhaustion. He wished Rover was more of a conversationalist - it was only his worry that Worm's vibrating car wouldn't survive the highway back to Mythic City that kept him between the shoulders. Now, finally, he pulled into Rey's driveway. He pushed aside the sickening feeling that he had to get Worm back her car before 7:30.

Rover got the doors while Less gently carried Rey to her bedroom and laid her on her duvet. Her shoes had already been cast off sometime in the night so he looked in the closet for a spare blanket to throw over her. The closet took up almost the entire wall of the bedroom, and it was obvious Rey had given a lot of thought as to the organization of it. It was divided into three parts - the left third was all clothes she obviously wore to work; suit jackets, skirts, blouses and all the appropriate things to go with it. The middle third was linens and towels, though many of the sheets were brand new and still in the packaging. There was a number of sheets for a smaller bed, likely the one she used to have. Curiously enough, Rey had a number of spare pillows and lots of spare blankets, as if she often had people sleeping over. The right-hand third of the closet contained an apparently more random collection of clothes, from an elegant evening gown to slinky lingerie to sweaters and jeans.

Rey had turned onto her side and brought her knees up so she was lying in an almost fetal position. She looked frail in the huge oak four-poster bed that dominated the room. As Less watched her for a moment, he saw her shudder in her sleep and heard her murmur softly in French. Less paused and hugged the heavy blanket he had selected. He felt a deep sadness that she had gone through such an ordeal. She was such a strong woman and it would not be easy for her to deal with her capture by the spirit and the fears it had made her face. He spread the blanket over her and sat next to her to tuck it around her shoulders. He laid his hand on her shoulder and stayed next to her for a few moments. "I'm sorry, Rey. For what happened," he whispered, mostly to himself.

Her head turned and her glowing eyes met his. "Not your fault." Less couldn't read any emotions in her eyes - they were shuttered tight. "I'll be fine."

"I know you will," he said kindly. He gently squeezed her shoulder. "Do you want to tell me what happened? Or should I leave you to sleep for a while?"

"I was at the club, and then... you found me," Rey replied. "What happened in between, I don't know. But I feel like someone hit me in the face with a bat."

"Mizuko said you left suddenly, talking to the air as if you thought you were with her. You drove off before she could catch you." He ran through the memories of the evening. They came sluggishly as if trying to

remember a dream. The bright lights of the police, vampires, racing along the highway in large cars, the derelict death-trap house. "We found you in an attic here in Mythic. There was a spirit." He searched for words to describe the otherly events. "Malevolent. It seemed to be feeding from your brain. Causing you fear, somehow, I guess." He moved through the unpleasantness quickly and came back to the firm, practical business he was more comfortable with. "The police probably have your car as evidence. When you're ready we'll have to go in and make some statements. We told them you had been kidnapped."

"The police." Rey sat up. "Better to go now, I think. The sooner we get this closed, the better." She took a deep breath and grimaced in pain. "I'm glad I wore clean underwear, what with the pictures they're going to want to take." She slid off the side of the bed and to her feet. "Drop me off at the police station. I can take a cab home."

"Are you sure? You've been through a lot," said Less. Maybe it was better for her to do something constructive and put off the nightmares.

"It needs to be done," Rey said. "We both know they're not going to find any physical evidence of my abductor. If they think we're trying to hide something, it's only going to make things worse." A little smile flirted around her mouth. "And the more pathetic I look, the easier they will be on me tonight."

"All right," he said reluctantly. "I'll swing by here after work to check on you. When the police ask for my statement I'll say you called me around 5:00 a.m. to say you were safe. You were drunk at the club, you left with a guy. He got mean and you fought him off but passed out in someone's backyard. You woke up feeling awful, basically unhurt, but remember little. Sound plausible?"

"Problem with that is I didn't drink anything last night," Rey replied. "All I had was pop, and if they ask at Corazon that's what they'll be told." She gave her head a minute shake. "I'm not going to lie, and I'm not going to ask you to. I'll tell them the truth. I don't recall much of what happened, but I remember someone in the back seat of my car." She closed her eyes. "His hands were bone white."

"I don't know anything about spirits but the thing we found in the attic was just luminescent fog, insubstantial. The guy in your back seat probably never truly existed except in your mind." Less had no idea if that was helpful. It had been real for her. What did it matter that it wasn't real for anyone else? "I'll still come back as soon as I can to see how you are doing. You have my number if you need anything."

Rey nodded. She knew it was likely useless to explain to Less about spirits and what they were capable of. He'd just write it off as insane ramblings, a side effect of what had happened to her. No, better to keep it all to herself. "Let's go."

Less helped get her things together and held the passenger door open for her as they got in the borrowed car. Not many words passed between them as they drove through the quiet, pre-rush-hour streets to the police station. After waving goodbye to Rey from the driver's seat, Less waited until Rey had safely mounted the several steps and entered the front doors of the building before driving off to return Worm's car.

Rey's time at the police station was brief. Luckily, her allies in the police force were able to smooth things over where needed. Her rather vague recollection of what happened when she left the club was accepted. The trip to the emergency room verified she had a mild concussion. The injuries they found on her, some attributed to the car crash, others designated as being by her kidnapper, were photographed in case the authorities ever found the man responsible.

When the doctors released her, she returned to her normal daily routine. While her days were peaceful, her nights were anything but. Nightmares disturbed her sleep, but that was nothing new to her. Her kidnapping just added more fodder for them. She never called Less to ask for help, and avoided having anything but brief telephone conversations with everyone. She was always fine, just really busy with work.

