

Thursday, February 16, 2012

Mizuko walked out of Amber's bathroom with a towel around her middle. She'd showered instead of taken a bath since she found the downstairs bath too small to be meaningful. Amber was in her room, presumably asleep, but likely merely depressed. Mizuko had lazed around the house herself, since she didn't have work tonight. It was late in the afternoon when she'd finally bothered to take a shower and get ready for the day.

A knock on the door diverted her from her trek to the stairs leading up the master bedroom. She altered path and checked the peephole. What she saw surprised her and she stood staring until her visitor knocked loudly again. Mizuko opened the door.

"*Queen Ishtar*," she said. She stepped back to allow the Spring Queen entry, then did a quick, awkward curtsy. "*I wasn't expecting anyone today.*"

Ishtar raised an eyebrow and scanned Mizuko critically. "Clearly."

"*Ah. Um, what can I do for you?*"

"I've come to collect on the favor you owe me, dear."

"*Favor?*"

"I supplied most of the herbs that were needed to save your life last year. You gave your friends leave to act as your proxy. Therefore, the favor I did, you owe."

Mizuko nodded, remembering.

"I have a task for you. Not unpleasant. In fact, I'd like you to visit a certain club called Glasshouse."

"*That's Simon's club*," Mizuko said.

"Not anymore. Anyway I'd like you to visit it a couple times a week at least. Take a look around and do that sorceress thing you do. I want to know if you spot any vampires. Remember them, and give me their descriptions. Names, too, if you can. Can you do that?"

"*Um. Yes? I suppose I can. Why do you want me to do this?*"

"The club belongs to Spring, but I have information that tells me it will be used by vampires as well as mortals and other changelings. I don't want you to interfere with any vampire you see. I just want information. You don't need to know why."

Mizuko didn't like that last, but she did owe a favor the equivalent of saving her life. It seemed like she owed a lot of people that over the past half year or so. "*As you wish, Emerald Queen.*"

Ishtar smiled brightly. "Good. I'll see you soon then."

The queen left and Mizuko wondered if someone had put her address and phone number up on a bulletin board somewhere. It seemed people had no trouble finding her.

—

Of all the changelings in the world, it had to be Viscissitude who showed up at the door to her office. She'd even made an appointment and went through all the proper steps to see Rey at the casino. Rey had no one to blame for the meeting; she'd been tied up all day working with the police gathering evidence on a client

who seemed to have some kind of cheating scheme. She'd finished at last and had the rest of her afternoon cleared when her secretary notified her that her 3 o'clock appointment with Miss Vey was here. Rey had let Miss Vey in but when she recognized the Ghul of Autumn, she wished she'd ordered no appointments for the rest of the day.

Rey held back a sigh, and castigated herself for not making a note in her planner what the supposed reason for this meeting was. With a friendly but businesslike smile, she gestured to one of the very comfortable chairs in front of her desk and returned to her even more comfortable one behind it. "I never thought I'd see you here," she admitted. "How might I be able to help you?"

"Oh, I'm fine," Sissy told her. "I'm actually here to help you. I don't know you well, but in my judgment you are beginning to be recognized in the Duchy. Not just as the holder of an office specific to Autumn, but as a capable person. At least, by your actions, that's what I see. Am I right?"

"I don't have my finger on the pulse of our people," Rey admitted, "but I believe that is true." Not that anyone had yet to come asking for her help or advice other than those in her motley, but she didn't expect a reputation to be built overnight - though she knew it could be destroyed in one.

Sissy nodded. "Your motley is associated with scouting dangerous places in the Hedge, to the benefit of the Duchy I believe even if some disagree. As well I heard there might have been some sort of monster hunting concerning things not of any world I'm familiar with in addition to things that recently have come crawling out of the Hedge outside the Duchy itself."

"In Santa Fe," Rey supplied, though she suspected Sissy already knew this. "We destroyed all we found, and we're pretty sure we got the source of them too. I certainly hope we did, for they were truly foul creatures."

"We? Who all were involved, if it isn't a secret?"

"The Legate, myself, and Drake Mari of the Summer Court," Rey replied. She didn't mention Amber because the girl wasn't involved in what happened in the Hedge, and certainly didn't need more changeling attention brought to her.

"Summer Court. That's interesting because that leads me to why I wanted to visit with you today."

Rey nodded and waited. She knew Sissy would get around to telling her what was going on eventually.

Sissy smiled and continued. "It seems you might have a little competition in the monster-defeated reputation contest. Summer has a few changelings who've begun making a name for themselves, as well. Last night they defeated something called Spring-Heeled? Jack. Have you heard of this one?"

"I've heard of a Spring-Heeled? Jack before," Rey replied with a nod. "Victorian London. Attacked women and attempted to rape them. Most noted for the fact he could leap very high, clearing tall walls with ease. Never was caught, though lord knows they tried." She shrugged. "It's possible there might be a hedge beast like it, or a changeling that matches that description."

Sissy nodded. "Rumor has it there was one like that here. The description of him and what he did fit. He's been appearing now and then to terrorize and rape in downtown Mythic, but several changelings of Summer took the initiative to take him down. I guess they used bait. Anyway, it worked and they took him out. A good thing, I'm sure. But they've been talking about it and the fact they want it known they'll take on monster hunting for the Duchy. I just thought that you might like to know, in case this is competition for you."

"I appreciate it," Rey said. "I'd love to know how they did it. And not that I don't believe them, but I tend not to believe something or someone's dead until I see a corpse and I know there should be one." She gave a

little laugh. "But taking out one monster does not a monster hunter make."

"I suppose not," Sissy said. She smiled politely and said, "Well. I don't mean to take up any more of your time at work. I just thought that you might appreciate a heads up before the rest of the Duchy starts talking about it. Since the Spring Queen herself was apparently aware of this menace, they won some credit beyond just their own court."

"I do appreciate it," Rey replied with a nod. "But I'm curious as to why you decided to do it. We're not exactly best friends."

Sissy smiled. "No. The first day I met you, I think you disapproved of how I treated your, at the time, only friend. But that doesn't mean I have anything against you. I'm *for* Autumn. Anything that brings recognition to our court helps us all. You are the only one in Autumn that can be vocal about monster hunting, since I can't talk about what I do for Veridia. And usually isn't the sort of thing that impresses anyway."

"Sometimes it's hard to tell what will impress someone." Rey paused for a moment, and then continued. "I'm not sure how well known it is, but I have been taught the intricacies of pledgecrafting. Should you hear of someone who might be in need of such advice, or the services of a pledgesmith, perhaps you might give them some direction?"

"As you say, we aren't friends. But I might," Sissy said with a smile and a meaningful look.

Rey relaxed back into her chair. "Would you like to see a picture?" she asked. Without waiting for a response, she pulled out a copy of one of the small brainbugs she'd drawn and placed it on the desk in front of Sissy.

Sissy leaned forward and took a good look. Her face was serious when she looked back up at Rey.

"That's one of the things we fought before the Winter Formal. We've nicknamed them brainbugs, because they look like the brain bugs from that movie *Starship Troopers*. That, and the fact they eat brains of anything they can get, from vileshrikes to changelings to armagants."

"Horrible things. You say you and the Legate cleared them out? With Drake Mari? I had him pegged as just another pretty-boy. Maybe there's a little of Summer's fire in him after all." She leaned back in her chair again and asked, "What's an armagant?"

"It's like someone took an armadillo and an elephant and smushed them together," Rey explained, "and threw in a heaping dose of foul disposition, with the temper of an irritated wild boar. But if you ever come across those brainbugs, be careful. Individually they move slow, but the more of them there are in a swarm, the faster they can move. They move round like slugs, leaving a trail of slime that smells like something rotting in a sewer. They're coated in the slime too, and it's very flammable, like touching a match to gasoline. Fire seems to be the most effective way to kill them. Problem is, they blow up when fire hits them. If that happens, make sure all the little bits burn up, otherwise they turn into really tiny brainbugs. And cold doesn't harm them. In fact, it turns their slime into a kind of armor for them."

"Fascinating," Sissy remarked. "I wonder where they came from. Well, I'll be sure to let certain people know that Autumn has a pledge master, as well as who that is."

In Hollow Love, Remy pays Mizuko a visit, tests her and begins the next phase of his plans. Mizuko notices that being with Remy has become empty, realizing she doesn't like how he makes her feel.

Friday, February 17th, 2012

In Two Timing, Mizuko has a date with Drake. After a harsh experience with Remy the previous night, Mizuko goes on a date with Drake in hopes of something better — and finds it.

Saturday, February 18th, 2012

The Wardens were worth their weight in gold sometimes. Otherwise, Less wouldn't have in his hands a new report written by Septimus.

This one was again news from the subway system under central Mythic City. Two murder victims had been found, apparently by Septimus or his contacts, and photos taken before the police arrived. The scene was grisly and included badly decayed corpses, a lot of fresh blood splashed around and what looked like arcane sigils inscribed around the area. Both bodies, aside from their state of decay, had been badly mutilated.

"I found these at a station near downtown," Septimus stated. "I thought you might like to hear about his due to the apparent use of some kind of occult power. The bodies are a rare find, as well, considering how fresh the blood was." He gave Less a meaningful look.

"Fresh blood on badly decayed corpses marked with arcane symbols," said Less. "Doesn't sound like the Shadow vampires. They would drink the blood and usually kidnap the people. What about those mortal mages we heard about with the whole Fidelius Carnival affair? Any rumours?"

"I have only partial information on them. I was able to work with Clare to gain preliminary data that points to a group of witches that appear to be protected in some way by Queen Ishtar. I was able to discern they seem to be headquartered out of a club named Blood Tears, but that's as far as I've been able to go. I can't get closer than that, but I was thinking of requesting Clare's aid. I understand her mortal mask is pleasing. Perhaps she could gain entry to the club and investigate further. They require members to come as couples or sponsored by an existing member you see. And while my significant other, Aporia, is a lovely and forgiving person, I doubt she'd like it if I asked her to accompany me to a sex club."

Since Aporia, who was a Summer Court changeling, was not a member of the Wardens and so Septimus could not speak to her of Warden business. Leave it to the Queen of Spring to harbor a nest of witches inside a sex club.

But that meant that if Clare were to carry on the investigation, she'd need a partner in order to allay suspicion.

None of that had anything obvious to do with the current issue of the murders at hand, however. Septimus pointed out, "Actually sire, I think this blood is from the victims. I believe they were freshly killed. If they were young vampires, that would explain the desiccated state of their flesh when they were killed. They appear to have resisted most strenuously, given the wide area the blood has been splashed."

"Ishtar witches taking out vampires in the subway station," mused Less. "I'll bet this adds a whole new dimension to the Baron of Shadows' turf war. I wonder what Ishtar's interest is in the territory. Clearly a message is being sent to someone. Better keep an eye out for a message from vampire Frank in case this shakes him up at all. It seems more serious than just killing a few vampire slaves." He paused to think about

all the players and what he could do to dig up some new information. "I'll see if the Spring Queen knows anything about what her worshippers are doing, and her policies, if any, regarding vampires. I'll check into some other sources, too." *Meaning Mizuko, and possibly Rey.* "That leaves Blood Tears. You can ask Clare, but somehow I think that if Aporia won't go with *you* to a sex club she would be even less keen for you to go with another woman." He gave Septimus a playful punch in the arm.

"Sire," Septimus said as he rubbed his arm, pretending it was a mighty blow, "I'm not sure we can conclude that mortal witches are behind this. But that could be ascertained quickly enough, I'm sure, if *you* asked Clare to go to the club with you. My Aporia has... a bit of a temper." Septimus smiled. It was chilly but real. "She would not approve if I went. But you might get Clare in the door posing as a couple, then she might go further on her own to infiltrate the witches."

Less was about to suggest that he could pose as a woman to accompany Septimus but it was clear that Septimus had no intention of passing through the doors. "Sounds like I should be trying to recruit Aporia to our cause," he laughed. "Well, ask Clare if she'll do it while I follow up on some other leads. Great work, Septimus! There is definitely something going on here and the Duchy will be glad to never know how much they owe you." He clasped Septimus' hand in a firm, sincere handshake.

Once his Warden had gone, Less called Mizuko on the number he had for her. He was never sure if it was current, or if she even currently had a working telephone.

She answered right away, as if she'd been sitting around with the phone in her hand. After he told her who it was that was calling, she said, "Hello, King Seleman." It sounded rather like "Solomon" and so it had a bit of a ring to it when she said it like that. She dutifully made the sort of small talk she thought mortals would make. "I'm glad you called. I've missed speaking with you lately."

"Yes, I'm sorry about that. The crown keeps me very busy. How is Amber doing these days?"

"I think good. She went out last night and didn't come home until nearly dawn. That's a good sign for her. Now she's complaining at me because I put goblin fruit in the bowl of mixed fruit. She just doesn't know what tastes good together." Less heard a distant "I do too, you hedge-munching faerie!"

"The reason I called is that there were some deaths at a subway station recently. It's possible that some vampires ran afoul of some witches. Have you heard about anything like that from Remy?"

"No," Mizuko said. "Is there something in particular that makes you think witches were involved?"

"The bodies were marked with weird magical-looking symbols. The only magic types we know of in town are Ishtar's witches."

"I know of some other kinds of magic as well," Mizuko stated. "As a sorceress, I've been asked to identify a lot of different artifacts and have been tutored in the occult by Queen Veridia. Maybe I should take a look at them. I can call Rey as well. If it is witchcraft, then she is a good contact since she was a witch herself in her younger days."

"Yes, good. I would like her input."

"Where would you like to meet?"

"Our Hollow is probably best. I'll bring the photographs."

Mizuko hung up, then called Rey. The group met at the Hollow shortly thereafter, though Mizuko arrived a little later than the others due to her distance from any door to the Hollow. Rey was already studying the photographs when Mizuko arrived.

"Hi, Mizuko," Rey said. "Now that we're all here, I'll let you know about the symbols. They don't have anything to do with any kind of witchcraft I know. They're actually more like what some of the New Age magicians call "High Magic". It's a Qabbalistic like thing, but these aren't them." She tapped one of the symbols in the picture. "They're of a similar style, but not their High Magic."

Mizuko bent over the pictures and looked at them closely. The first thing she did was to say that she didn't recognize the outfits of the deceased. Of course they were quite a mess, but that was all she had to go by if she wanted to identify them. Next she looked at the symbols Rey pointed out. She shook her head. *"I agree with Rey. It's no magic I've seen before. It could be that someone just wanted it to look like a ritual killing and wrote a bunch of things he thought looked magic-y. But if there was really magic used there, I might be able to detect it if you take me to this place. If I have time to study it, I might even be able to tell you if there was still active magic there and what it was doing."*

"Are you familiar with the magic performed by Ishtar witches?" asked Less of Rey. "I guess they probably aren't Qabbalistic, though."

Rey shook her head. "I know what they can do, but it's not this." She looked at the picture again. "Whoever did this tore those vampires apart, then drew some symbols in their blood all over the place. I can't confidently say the symbols mean something, or that they're something someone made up to throw investigators off the scent. Not without doing some research."

Mizuko picked up another one and turned it. *"Some of these symbols are inscribed inside a circle."* What she was talking about was partly obscured by the bodies, but there was a rough circle drawn in blood on the cement surface there. It was probably seven feet in diameter, assuming the bodies were average height for a male. She put the picture down and looked at Less thoughtfully. *"Less? What is underneath that spot?"*

Rey took the photograph and gave it another look. Circles were for rituals, she thought. Was the murderer so confident the scene wouldn't be discovered before he was finished. The circle, the number of symbols drawn all over, it would have taken time to do. Was there something special about that particular spot? Perhaps she should give Marie a call. Her sister might have more knowledge of magically active or significant locations in the city.

Less thought about Mizuko's question. "I haven't been to the scene of the crime yet so I'm not totally sure. The bodies were in the subway station so there can't be much below. Possibly another subway tunnel, more likely a sewage pipe or service tunnel. Pretty much all concrete structures are hollow so maybe there's a void." Maybe it was staring at the mystic symbols, the blood and gore, and the vampires that suddenly made his brain turn left. "Or maybe the concrete was poured over something. A double-crossing gangster, or something that was meant to be hidden forever. Either way, we should check it out, but first do any of you know if a vampire could survive this? If they are vampires, and we could get into the police morgue, we could ask them personally what happened."

"I have no idea how much damage they can take before they won't ever move again," Mizuko admitted. Recent events, however, caused her to wonder if she might end up finding out the hard way if she wasn't careful.

"There's no hard or fast rule about that," Rey added. "Vampires, like Changelings, are a wide and varied lot. Some can take more damage than others by their nature, while others have supernatural gifts that help them resist damage. They can even heal gunshot wounds easily. But I don't know if questioning them would be a good idea. If they were terrified when taken down, they could end up in a frenzy awake, a kind of berserk state, and when they're like that, they'll kill anyone and anything in their way. And simply chaining them to a gurney is unlikely to keep them confined and under control. Even if I could use my contacts to get into the morgue, that place isn't secure enough, and I don't want to get caught stealing a body from there."

"Okay, we can talk about getting into the morgue later," suggested Less. "Let's head down to the subway where the photos were taken to see what we can find."

"I want to make a phone call before we head out," Rey said. She thought a quick call to her sister might be able to get some information that might help.

When Marie answered, Rey could hear the sounds of drills, hammers, and saws in the background. "Hello?" Marie shouted above the din.

"Hi! It's Rey. Do you have time for a quick question?"

"Sure sis, what've you got?"

"Do you know if there are any magical hotspots or other locations like that in the subway system?" Rey asked.

Like that? thought Less. *What other hotspot is she talking about?*

"Eh, what? I thought you said you were looking to get hot in the subway." Marie shouted over hammering.

"No," Rey replied with a laugh. "A magically active hot spot."

"Oooh, magic hot spot. No, can't say I've heard of one down there at all. Too many people. Disturbs any kind of energy-raising magic, you know?"

"Have you heard of *anything* magic-related in the tunnels?" Rey hoped she might get an answer as to if there was a reason the murderer chose that particular spot, but she was beginning to feel she'd met a dead end with this particular line of questioning.

"No. Why? What's going on?"

Rey glanced at her motley-mates before speaking again. "Not something we should be talking about over the phone. Can we meet later today?"

"Sure. I'll finish up here in about six hours." That put it about 10 o'clock at night, which meant it was probably crunch time on whatever construction project she was working this week.

"That should be okay. Gimme a call when you're done, and we'll figure out where to meet then."

"Okay, will do."

After Rey hung up, she found Mizuko looking at her, wondering if she found anything out.

"I was thinking that if it was someone trying to do real magic, the murder location might be one of magical power or other significance," Rey explained. "Marie says she hasn't heard of any down there. The conditions aren't right."

"They might not need a special location. Blood and sacrifice are also said to raise mystical power," Mizuko signed in Glymjack again. "Violence and murder also release strong emotions upon which we have learned certain things may feed. Or maybe this all is some kind of message."

"I know," Rey replied with a nod. "'I'm just ruling out possibilities one by one."

They left Rey's car at West Mythic station and took the train to the murder location. When the doors slid open the motley disembarked the train with a few other passengers. The station was normally very busy on weekdays, everyone coming and going from work, but weekends were quiet. Everyone tended to stay in the suburbs and visit the malls with their acres of parking instead of taking public transit to the city centre. As a result, there weren't that many shops worth going to downtown.

The motley paused, waiting for the platform to clear. The train rolled into the tunnel, dragging behind it a gust of wind that rustled their clothes. "This way," said Less as he started for the end of the platform where the train had left. He walked behind the stairs and escalators that led to the surface. It was a little-used part of the platform, mostly only for when the trains had extra cars added for special events, or by maintenance workers. The end of the platform was cordoned off by yellow crime-scene tape but the police seemed to be finished with it. No one was present except for the white outlines of the bodies and the bloodstains.

"How much do we have until the next train comes by?" Rey asked softly as she pulled her camera out of her pocket.

Less looked at his watch. "Saturday afternoon...about 17 minutes."

Mizuko crouched and looked around carefully. She didn't seem to have any aversion to crawling over the outlines of bodies or the bloodstains, but instead stared at each symbol as well as the large circle. She spent about two minutes doing this before she stood up and brushed the palms of her hands on her jeans. She frowned and shook her head.

"What's wrong?" Rey asked, pausing in her photographing the scene.

Mizuko shifted to a squatting position. "I think I've seen this before. I don't remember where," Mizuko in sign.

"So, it's probably legit, then? Can you sense magic?" asked Less.

Mizuko looked unhappy. "I sense no magic at play here at all," she signed.

Rey tried not to glare at Less, and instead focused on getting good pictures. The thought of her input being ignored because Mizuko said she thought she saw the symbols before pissed her off.

Less stared at the scene while Rey took photos. "So, probably Qabbalistic High Magic, whatever that is, but no residual magic - possibly wiped clean by all the passengers through the station. Is this some kind of anti-vampire turf war?"

"Qabbalistic-like magic," Rey said. "And I doubt this is a turf war. They wouldn't leave bodies lying around like this. Aged corpses that appeared to have been bleeding and wearing modern clothes? Too many questions. Too much attention. They'd have disposed of the bodies and left little to no traces of what happened behind."

Mizuko stood up and dusted off her hands. "I wonder where they went."

"Where who went?" Rey asked.

Less was curious as to what Mizuko had to say as well so he kept at ear open while he searched around the end of the platform for some evidence that there might be something below the magic circle: a manhole, perhaps, a drain, or some sort of conduit emerging from the ground.

"The killer," Mizuko stated. She signed to clarify. "There was a lot of blood. They must have gone somewhere from here. Would there not likely be blood to indicate direction? Unless he used tidy wipes or something."

"Or they may have ability to teleport," Rey replied. "I know someone who can do it, but it takes a lot of power."

"So they clearly didn't do that here," Mizuko pointed out.

"How can you tell?" Rey asked. "Not all magic leaves a trace behind, regardless of how powerful it is."

"Really?" Mizuko wondered. "What kind doesn't?"

"Some witchcraft," Rey replied. "Very nasty, but next to impossible to detect."

Mizuko frowned. That sounded like very bad news. She looked around at the symbols again.

Less thought about where the perpetrator could have gone and widened his search to sense if there were any gates to the Hedge nearby. He thought he detected, some five paces away and spattered between the rails of the train tracks, some small, dark spots. He could get a better look and determine if it might be blood if he jumped down onto the tracks. Less checked his watch. Still 12 or so minutes before the train arrived. While Rey and Mizuko were arguing about magic, he slipped off the platform and stepped carefully over the tracks to the area that had caught his attention. He trusted the Winter Mantle to keep him from being noticed by any subway employees.

"Have you found something?" Rey asked Less, spotting him walking off.

In fact he had. He'd be more certain if he had a light with him, but it certainly could be blood. What was more, the dots of fluid seemed to grow smaller, trailing off in the direction of the tunnel and away from the boarding areas. He fished out his cell phone to use its light to confirm the colour of the liquid, then hurried back to the platform. "Blood. There are drips leading out into the tunnel." He pointed in the direction the trail led. "The drops get smaller as they go."

Mizuko hopped down next to Less and looked up at him, then down the long tunnel.

"Let's see where it goes." Rey jumped down to join the others. "Do you know of any homeless who might hang around or squat in the tunnels around here?"

Less checked his watch nervously. "Um, we've got just over 5 minutes before the next train rolls through here. Not to mention that according to Remy we'd be interloping into the territory of an old and established vampire group. We should at the very least wait for the train schedule to lighten up and tell some people where we're going in case we don't come back. Besides, I have a few more questions about what you think is going on here." He climbed quickly back onto the platform.

Mizuko looked at the tunnel, her mind imagining the oncoming rush of a bright light. She remembered well their first meeting. Hastily, she climbed back up onto the platform and stood next to Less. "The tunnel does seem narrow," Mizuko agreed. She continued to sign, "Although apparently the killer doesn't mind being in vampire territory. Do you think there are utility nooks or tunnels that can be used to get out of the way of the trains? Is that how people get around down here without being run over?"

"Well, there is that narrow sidewalk that goes down the side of the tunnel," Less admitted, pointing to the small gate at the end of the platform marked with the 'Do Not Enter' symbol. "But normally all train activity is stopped before maintenance workers go into the tunnels."

As Less answered Mizuko's question, Rey rejoined them on the platform. "What about security cameras?" she asked. "Are there any covering the tunnel, and if there are, do you think you might be able to get us copies of the footage around the time of the attack?"

"That's a good question," said Less. He knew the security varied for each station depending on past problems and budget. "I can ask, but I don't have any special authority. They might do me a favour since I work at the train station." He reviewed their situation. "So, you say that it may or may not be magic, but don't think it's a turf war. I disagree with you that, by the way, if somebody disappeared there could be any number of explanations and no message would be sent. This, on the other hand, is quite the message. If it isn't a turf war or a magical ritual, why do you think this happened?"

"It could be Hunters," Rey said. "But that still doesn't make much sense to me. If it was a turf war, or someone who had experience in killing vampires, they'd have made sure they were destroyed. Decapitated them or burnt them to ashes. They wouldn't have left them lying around like that." She gave a little frustrated sigh. "I need to spend some more time looking at the photos, and see what info I can get from my friends in the MCPD. They might be able to figure out if there was more than one person involved, though with that single blood trail leading away, I don't think there was. And if only one person was able to do all that damage to the vampires without being taken down themselves, they have to be very powerful themselves. Likely a supernatural of some kind, but which kind, I've got no idea. Not yet.

"But those symbols, if they mean something to the murderer then we need to find out what it is. Otherwise, it could be an attempt to divert suspicion onto the witches and other practitioners in the city. But if you're looking for a definitive answer as to why it happened, I can't tell you. We simply don't have enough information."

"Now we're talking!" said Less. "Do you think that following that blood trail is our best way to get the information we need?"

"It might give us some information, like where the murderer went, but beyond that," Rey said with a shrug.

"It might also give us a lot of information on just how powerful this supernatural creature is, how vigourously the tunnel vampires defend their territory, and how dangerous meeting a train in a subway tunnel is," said Less. "While I recognize that quick action could prevent further deaths, there doesn't seem to be a clear and present danger to the Duchy, which is what I have to think about right now. We can follow up leads that might prepare us for going into that tunnel. Talk to your friends at the police. I will increase surveillance on the subway stations and try to find out what might have been captured on the surveillance video - though that was probably taken by the police already. We need to find out if these magic circles have any purpose. I'd still like to try to interview the corpses in the morgue - or be there when someone shows up to claim them. Anything else?"

Yeah, don't order me around like some Winter peon, Rey thought silently. "No." She looked at her watch. "I need to get going. I'll let you know what I find out, if anything."

"Bye Rey," Mizuko signed. She addressed Less. "Less? I don't know if this is reassuring, but have you considered that this arcane-like drawing might simply be a... doodle? I know Rey thinks I'm wrong about there being no magic used here, but what if I'm right? The evidence you've gathered indicates a single suspect of great power. But these markings on the ground appear to be meaningless and nonmagical. What if the killer was... just waiting around to be sure someone found the bodies? Because honestly, that's what I think the killer was doing."

Less sighed. "You think the circles and everything were drawn *after* the murders? Huh." He thought about that. "Pretty weird artist. If he or she wanted to show people what they'd done, why leave? And who were they waiting for?" He tamped his umbrella on the concrete in annoyance, then shrugged his shoulders. "I'm going to pop into the security office to see what I can get out of them. Do you want to come along?"

Mizuko nodded. "Yes please," she signed.

Hollow Love

Mizuko had decided she was going to convince Amber to go out with her to a movie. When she asked earlier, Amber had mumbled something or other through her bedroom door that Mizuko chose to take as an affirmative. Now she was all dressed up in a nice brown and green skirt with black trim and a strapless top. She'd even managed one of those bras that were supposed to lend support without straps over the shoulder, though she was doubtful it was going to work very well. She hated the thing, but not only had she made the effort but she even made an attempt at a little makeup.

Amber hadn't even come out of her room yet. Mizuko was about to plead with her that even if she wasn't going to go to the movies, she at least had to come out for something to eat, when she heard the apartment door open. She turned away and took a couple steps down the short hall to where it opened into the large living and eating area.

Remy stood there, returning something to his suit coat pocket. He hadn't noticed her yet, and there was a slight frown on his face.

Mizuko hadn't any shoes on yet, and she padded softly toward him, watching curiously.

He looked up and when he saw her, the frown smoothed away into a smile. "Good evening, *ma petite*. I didn't think you were expecting me."

She continued toward him, stopping a pace away while signing, "I was trying to get Amber to go out with me. Was something wrong?"

"What makes you think there is?"

Mizuko looked at him steadily, then folded her arms, now convinced there was.

"Am I not allowed to visit you? Or have you changed your mind about wanting to spend more time with me?"

She signed, "You were frowning. I only wondered what has made you unhappy."

"Oh, it's nothing, really. I was just hoping the floors would be fixed soon, but it's going to take another couple of days before they can begin work."

Mizuko signed, "They have done good work cleaning up and making the place livable."

"Perhaps." He looked around. "I would have preferred it all be done at once."

Mizuko glanced at the boarded-up sliding door to the balcony. "I don't think I'm going to convince Amber to come out of her room today to go out. Would you like to stay a while? Maybe there is a movie or something on. Or maybe we could find something else to entertain ourselves." She edged a little closer.

A knowing smile covered his face. "Do you have something in mind?"

"There's always one thing on my mind. One thing I just can't seem to get enough of." She moved closer, stopping when the tips of her breasts brushed his chest. "*Kiss me?*"

He obliged, and wrapped his arms around her as his mouth plundered hers.

Even as she opened herself to him and embraced him, her hands untucked the back of his shirt and slipped her hands inside, the better to feel his warm skin. She pressed her body against him, her curves fitting neatly into all the right places. She let his tongue probe her, then wrestled him with his own tongue, giving him a taste of what she wanted to do with her body.

Amber shambled around the corner wearing bunny slippers and a robe. Her hair was a mess and she had circles under her eyes. She'd been aiming for the kitchen but stopped and turned her head to stare at Mizuko and Remy as they passionately devoured each other. "Damn, guys. Pick a bedroom or something. I'm gonna make some tea."

Mizuko wasn't listening, nor did she stop or change her urgent tempo.

"It appears Amber has emerged from her room," Remy said, backing off on the kiss.

Mizuko turned her face toward Amber and beamed a smile at her. She reluctantly removed her arms from around Remy and then sighed, "I'm glad to see you out and about. I was getting worried."

Amber shrugged. "Yeah, well maybe you are right. So I got beat up. It happens. Time to get over it." She shuffled into the kitchen and started looking around for a pot in which to heat water.

Mizuko slipped an arm around one of Remy's and twined her fingers in his. She watched Amber for a moment with some concern on her face, then she looked up at Remy.

"Make a choice, Mizuko," Remy said for Mizuko's ears only. "Your friend or me."

She raised an eyebrow at him and looked a little puzzled, but it passed. She turned toward the spiral stairs that led up to the master bedroom, pulling him with her. Remy hid a triumphant smile as he followed Mizuko. It was time to put the next phase of his plan into action.

The nymph drew him after her into the bedroom and could hardly wait to strip off his clothes, aggressively running fingernails over his skin.

He took a step back from her, removing her hands and slowly undressed himself, carefully folding each piece of clothing before removing the next. Mizuko watched, her eyes fixed on each movement, like a hungry lioness patiently waiting for her next meal to come into view. When he was finished, he stood there and looked at her and waited.

She smiled then mimicked him, slowly pulling off her own clothes. She took her skirt and top off neatly and put them in a stack as well, then followed with the rest of her underclothes. She then embraced him, kissing his neck and seeking his lips. As they kissed, he maneuvered her backward until the backs of her legs were

pressed against the side of the bed.

With a little shove, he pushed her to the mattress and covered her body with his. His hands roamed her body, seeking the spots he knew would arouse her the fastest. It had been a long time, and she was ready quickly.

He knew her body well, and knew it would rule her when she was aroused. He rose to his knees over her and then drew her up, in position to service him. She remembered well what he'd shown her that he liked, and she took his shaft in her mouth, licking and sucking with enthusiasm, while also holding his testicles. She gave him everything she could, sucking and pulling on him while she teased and tickled his sensitive balls in her hand.

When he pushed her away, she knew he was ready for something else. He put his left arm under her left shoulder and deftly flipped her over, then slid off the bed so that he was standing behind her. He pulled her hips to him, letting her legs dangle off the bed and plunged into her. She gasped and struggled to crawl away from him, managing to get one knee under her, but he leaned over her back, one arm catching her right arm, the other wrapped around her waist and forced her down. Then he bit her on the side of the neck — not hard enough to break the skin, but enough to bring the moan of pleasure and pain he knew it would evoke.

She stopped trying to crawl away and took him willingly as he thrust himself into her in a show of dominating power. He let go of her neck and her arm and lowered her face into the soft cushion of the bed as he continued, long, deep thrusts. He added the extra stimulation of playing with her clitoris with his finger and was treated to her muffled, panting gasp in response. He knew what he was doing and she was soon crying out in desperation.

She came so hard, he could feel her clenching at him but since he wasn't done yet, he didn't alter his pace or stop anything that he was doing. If anything, he thrust harder, and pinched her clitoris so that she made a pained, bestial howl. It made her clench down on him even harder and it was just what he needed. He exploded inside her, a rushing sense of power over the exceptionally beautiful creature within whose loins he'd demonstrated his dominance. His hands kept her roughly pressed to his pelvis so that she squirmed and struggled uselessly while he throbbed against her wall, then she orgasmed again and choked back her cries, going limp on the bed.

He eased out of her, then swept her legs up onto the bed so she wouldn't fall onto the floor. He remembered she'd complained about that before. This time, she'd have nothing to complain about. He quickly and efficiently cleaned himself up and dressed in silence. When he did up the last button, he pulled a sheet up over Mizuko, pressed a chaste kiss on her forehead and left.

A minute later, Mizuko picked herself up, feeling like she'd been rewarded like a dog who'd done the right trick. She dabbed at her eye with a thumb and then stared at the tear she found. Well, she told herself, at least he had paid some attention to her. Her stomach twisted at that thought. She could still feel what he'd left in her. She rushed to the bathroom and spent time cleaning herself up thoroughly.

Two Timing

Drake called her the following night, two nights after the Winter Formal, much to Mizuko's delight. She'd very much enjoyed the dances they had shared at the Winter Formal, so she asked if they might go dancing again. There was a club she'd wanted to visit called Glasshouse. She told him her motley mates had been there before but she'd missed the opportunity. Drake wanted to start with dinner, so he asked to pick up Mizuko at six.

Mizuko fretted over how she dressed and asked Amber for help with makeup.

"Listen, Mizuko," Amber began after keeping her silence about it for a while. "Wasn't Remy just here last night?"

Mizuko nodded and examined the color of her lipstick in the mirror.

"So, aren't you going out with him right now?"

Mizuko shook her head, then turned to her and signed, "Of course not. I'm going out with Drake right now."

Amber rolled her eyes. "I *know* that. I mean, most people just date one person at a time. Won't Remy be angry with you?"

Mizuko nodded. "He might, especially since I told him I would be faithful to him. But I never said for how long. Anyway, I've been told by two people now that he does not communicate with talk, but with action. So, I am taking action. If he does not wish to include me in his world, and is only interested in sex, then sex it is. I'll go out with Drake. Maybe he'll pay attention to me and let me be part of his life sometimes."

"Jesus, Zuko," Amber said.

"What?"

"That's... kind of cold, don't you think? I mean, what if he really loves you and he's just been too busy to go out much?"

Mizuko shook her head. "If he's too busy to see me, to make time for me as I have for him, then it is beneath me to continue to --"

"Zuko! You just had sex with the guy last night! Doesn't that count as making time for you?"

Mizuko paused. "Maybe. He's... he makes me feel..." She frowned. "I don't know. They are real feelings, though, whatever they are. But when I danced with Drake at the Formal, I felt different things. I want to explore this. I might like how he makes me feel better. Or maybe I won't. But I want to see."

"Most girls would break it off with one guy before dating another. They have names for girls who don't, you know. Not nice ones."

Mizuko shrugged. "I don't care," she signed. "Annabeth says it is beneath me to wait for Remy and say I would do things for him. If he wants me, he'll show me. I already showed him. If Drake wants me, then I expect he'll show me, too. If I want him, I'll show him just as I did for Remy. Whoever responds is the one I'll want to be with more."

Amber sighed. It was a lost cause. Mizuko would do whatever she would do. As usual, it was Amber's job to do damage control.

Six o'clock rolled around and security notified them that Drake had arrived. Mizuko was still struggling with some stockings in her room, so Amber had him sent on up to the apartment. When Drake arrived at the door, he was wearing black trousers and a shirt almost the same color of his skin. The top few buttons were open, affording those who looked a glimpse of his chest and some of the hair growing there. In his hands he carried two small bouquets of flowers. "Hello, Amber," he said with a broad, friendly smile.

A smile flickered on her face. "Wow," she said. "I mean, come on in. Mizuko should be down in a minute."

Drake nodded, and offered the bouquet with tiny white daisies to Amber. "For you."

She looked surprised. "Aw, thank you!" She paused to give them a sniff and this time her smile stayed. She found a vase for them in the kitchen and put them on the table. She then called, "Zuko! Drake is here."

"Okay," returned Mizuko's voice. It was followed by some thumping sounds.

"Uh oh. I'll go check on her." Amber trotted to the stairs and hurried up. Drake had a few moments to himself while Amber helped Mizuko. He took a moment to look around the apartment from where he stood. It was much nicer than where he lived, but to him it seemed rather cold. Impersonal. There was nothing that spoke to the lives of the people who lived in the space.

After a few minutes, Mizuko walked carefully down the spiral staircase. She was dressed in a lovely green and black sleeveless dress. It was simple but charming and the deep V neckline drew the eye temptingly but it was how the dress revealed Mizuko's shapely calves up to her knees that drew Drake's interest. She was wearing dark stockings tonight, likely the source of the sounds of struggle, if didn't miss his guess.

He enjoyed watching her descend the stairs, and wondered if he might be fortunate enough tonight to be able to enjoy them more than just on the dance floor.

When Mizuko reached the floor, he took a step toward her. "You look wonderful," Drake said honestly. "These flowers are for you." The bouquet had several miniature red and white roses, surrounded by some dark blue flowers.

Mizuko looked at them and then at Drake. A surge of unbidden emotion swelled behind her eyes as she took them. "*Drake, they are lovely.*" Her cheeks colored as a smile lit her eyes and curled her lips. No one had ever given her flowers before and she was surprised at how the simple offering made her feel.

Amber was helpful as always. "I'll put them in something for you, Zuko. If they are in water, they'll stay fresh longer."

Mizuko let her friend take the flowers. Amber put them in a tall glass of water and put it on the little coffee table in the living room.

Once the flowers were out of her line of sight, Mizuko had a chance to appreciate Drake. "You look very different than you did the night of the Winter Formal," she signed. "You look amazing."

"I'm glad you approve," he replied, his smile broadening to a grin. "Have you given any more thought as to where you'd like to have dinner?" When he'd called they'd talked briefly about it, but hadn't made any definite plans.

Mizuko had an idea. "There is a place called the Pipe and Fiddle. Rey calls it a gastro-pub. I know she is part

owner, but I haven't been there before. Would you like to try it?"

"I've been there once," Drake replied, "and I really liked it. Really good beer, and the food is amazing." He offered her his hand. "Let's say goodbye to Amber, and then we'll be off."

Mizuko turned and gave Amber a cheery wave goodbye and Amber wished them good times. She also reminded Mizuko to double check that she had a key, since Amber intended to go out tonight, herself.

—

The Pipe & Fiddle was really busy, and there was a 45 minute wait for a table. Neither Drake nor Mizuko were in a hurry, so they took seats at the bar. Drake ordered a sample for the two of them to share, so they'd have an idea of what they might want to order with dinner, and an appetizer so the beer wouldn't go straight to their heads.

When the beer sampler arrived, it had seven small glasses, each holding about half a cup of beer. There was some of everything the pub had on tap, from a standard session beer to an Imperial stout, and a small batch of Peanut Butter Cup Porter. "Which would you like to taste first?" Drake asked her, and waited for her to make her choice.

She puzzled over them but was unable to make a decision. "I haven't had beer before. Is there one that isn't too sweet?" she signed.

"None of them are," Drake signed in reply.

Mizuko settled on one whose little glass proclaimed it to be an Irish Red. She sipped it and puzzled over the taste. At first she thought it was horrible, then merely bitter, then she thought she detected other flavors as well. All these thoughts showed on her face as she took another sip.

"What do you think?" he signed, watching her face.

"I'm not sure. May I try another?"

With his smiling encouragement, she finally settled on one, a wheat beer that was served with a bit of lemon that she decided she would like to have. The others, she told him, might be an acquired taste.

Drake decided to go with a mug of Catherine the Great Imperial Stout, named not after the Russian ruler of history, but after the chef's wife. The two of them chatted about beer and food, and Drake told her more about the beers they'd tried. Before long, it was their turn to be seated. Mizuko decided on the fish and chips, and Drake ordered a steak and potato pie.

After they were alone again, Mizuko signed, "I really appreciate your help the other night. With Amber. I still can't believe what happened. The only one I can think of that might have done that is Vicissitude, but she said she wasn't sure it was her. If she'd wanted Amber hurt or hurt worse, she could have said it was definitely Amber."

"Perhaps she was as much a victim of the situation as Amber was," he said. "It's obvious whoever was behind it set Amber up to take the fall. Vicissitude isn't the kind of person to lie. If she thought it was Amber, she certainly would have said so."

"Yes, you're right," Mizuko signed with a very somber look on her face. "Vicissitude doesn't lie."

She took a drink of the golden wheat and then asked, "Do you have any idea where those slimy things in the Hedge came from?"

Drake shook his head. "They're unnatural, even for the Hedge. It's like they just sprang into being out of nothing. I'd come across some of them a couple days earlier, but there were only a handful of them. I killed them, and didn't think much of it until I found the slime trails again."

"Maybe they were just a passing whim of some Keeper out on the prowl," Mizuko offered. She wrinkled her nose as she remembered the smell. "I should not have brought those things up before dinner."

Drake reached out and took one of Mizuko's hands in his. "There is something I could do to get rid of any nausea you might be feeling from the memory of it."

She looked at him wonderingly, then nodded.

He began to massage her hand, rubbing it with firm but gentle pressure. His strong, dexterous fingers eventually stopped and put pressure on a specific spot of her hand, and the nausea disappeared.

Her lips parted in surprise. "*How did you do that?*"

"Accupressure," Drake replied with a grin, though he did not release her hand. "My roommate last year was a massage therapist and I picked up a couple of things."

"*Very useful things. What other kinds of things can you do with accupressure?*" Mizuko wondered.

"Some people use it to help quit smoking, others find it helps with any kind of addiction, like drugs or alcohol. I'm not an expert by any means." He released her hand so she could sign again.

"With just the right touch?" Mizuko signed. She shook her head, amazed. "It sounds like magic to me."

"The right touch and the right pressure," he signed with a nod. "But get it wrong, and you could cause intense pain."

"How do you find the right place? I mean like some of us are very different from," she glanced around the room full of mortals, "others."

"Well, I was hoping that since you're very human in form," he signed, "that it'd work on you. My roommate was a mortal, and knows nothing about us. I haven't tried it on someone with more unusual bodies."

"Oh. Well, I liked it. You can try it on me again later," Mizuko said. "If I'm nauseous or pass out or something."

Drake chuckled, but saved from having to say anything by the arrival of their meals.

After a cautious sampling of her fries and then the fish (lightly breaded), Mizuko dove in with gusto. With her hands busy and her mouth full, she made little conversation until she was through — which was soon.

Mizuko washed down her last bite of fish with the wheat beer and took the opportunity to look at Drake again. It might have been called a stare, but if it was then it was an appreciative one.

He returned her gaze with an amused one. "What, do I have some sauce smeared on my chin?" He was eating more slowly, enjoying the meal and the company, and was only about half finished.

Mizuko shook her head and signed, "I'm not sure but I think this might be my first date of this kind."

"I'm not sure I understand."

"I mean like going out. To enjoy company."

Drake's expression held surprise, then a hint of pleasure. "And are you enjoying the company you are keeping?"

"Yes. In fact I think I understand why Amber goes out now. It's nice. And it's not boring."

"What were your other dates, then? Did he take you somewhere and you spent the evenings staring at the walls and watching paint dry?" he asked with a chuckle.

Mizuko shook her head. "One day in the fall I decided I wanted to have sex. So I went out with my friend Rey and I found someone. That someone was the vampire that was mentioned the other night. Since then we got together for the same thing a few more times, mostly for that reason. Does it offend you that I said that?"

Drake shook his head.

"After that there were a couple of times he went out of his way to help my friends and I. I began to think he was something more than what he was, like he might really care about me. But I was wrong. He just likes sex. I don't blame him, though. He's good at it, when he wants to be, and after all that's the reason I went to him to begin with." She paused again, and tried to read his face. "I'm sorry. Does this talk make you uncomfortable? Some people don't like to talk about sex."

"No, it doesn't bother me. I would be a liar, though, if I said I wouldn't mind being compared with your previous lovers. Unless, of course, I came out the winner in the comparisons."

"We haven't had sex," Mizuko pointed out. Then she made an O with her lips and smiled. She signed, "If that's your goal, you've made a good start with dinner, and dancing will be even better."

"I wonder if I should be insulted by you thinking all I want from you is sex," Drake signed.

"Don't be," she said. "If that's what I really thought, I wouldn't have left the apartment. I'm just incredibly bad at polite conversation." She smiled. "I do like being able to speak openly. I'll try not to insult you."

"Looking at you, sometimes I forget you're an elemental," he signed. "Sex would be nice, but that's not the point of tonight."

"I'm glad," Mizuko signed. "Otherwise I'd have wasted a lot of time on this makeup and dress."

Drake laughed and shook his head. "Would you like to get some dessert?"

"If it is small, light, and not made of meat, then yes," Mizuko signed.

"Not many desserts involve meat," Drake signed, "but we can ask for a dessert menu and look."

"Will you be having dessert?"

"I think so," he signed with a smile, his eyes mischievous and holding her gaze.

She bit her lip, but managed to keep her eyes on his. "Would you like to share one with me?"

"I'd be delighted to." He knew what she was thinking - and it wasn't just about dessert. But given what he now knew about her previous "dates", he didn't want to fall into the same old mold. Tonight was going to be something different for her, and he wasn't going to let his baser nature get the best of him.

"Okay," she signed. "What's your favorite dessert?" She picked up the dessert menu that was stashed at the end of the table along with the salt and pepper shakers and began flipping through it.

"To be honest, I like them all. I have a bit of a sweet tooth," he admitted. "But I like things with sticky sauces best. You have to put some effort into eating it, but the reward is worth it."

"Me too!," Mizuko replied with a wide smile. She put the dessert menu down and went for a technique she saw in the movies. While distracting him with a question, "So you know what you like? I'm game for that." She slipped one foot out of a shoe, found his pant leg, and let her stockinged toes slip inside and massage his calf.

He looked at her for a moment, then laughed. Drake took the dessert menu, opened it up and pointed to the picture of a brownie sundae. "I was talking about things like hot fudge sauce, which this has in abundance."

Her foot stopped its exploration. "That's embarrassing. Sorry about that," she signed. She didn't look embarrassed nor particularly sorry. She let her toes trail down his leg before she wiggled her foot back into the shoe. "And yes, let's try the hot fudge brownie sundae when you are finished with your dinner."

They managed to finish their meal and have some dessert without too many more social faux pas on Mizuko's part.

Drake and Mizuko arrived at Glasshouse after parking up the street. Since it was Friday night, the parking lot was packed. The night was cold and Mizuko went without a jacket since hers was ugly and Ambers were pretty much ruined, but she didn't mind the excuse to take Drake's arm and walk close to his side.

They walked through the spacious entry area and Drake gave the doorman a couple bills for the cover charge. The big balding man gave them a broad grin and let them past. He watched them both as they walked away, enjoying the sight. If they were any indication of the kind of clientele this place was going to be attracting, he decided his job was going to be very pleasant.

Since the door to the place opened directly into the dance floor, Drake and Mizuko were immediately surrounded by throbbing throngs of people. It was enough to startle Mizuko, who bumped into Drake after being jostled by half-drunk clubbers.

Drake held her close for a moment, then slid through the crowd to a spot that was less crowded so they could get their bearings. A couple of women called out his name, and he lifted his hand in greeting, but otherwise kept his attention on Mizuko.

The advantage of using sign language in a place like this was that she didn't have to shout over the music and crowd for her date to hear her. Mizuko signed, "Do you mind if we get a drink and explore a little first? I've never been here before."

"Sure." He altered their trajectory toward the bar. On the way, Mizuko saw someone with a red drink and a pickle in it, so she asked for one of those and discovered it was called a Bloody Mary, which for some reason made her laugh. After Drake ordered something for himself, he showed Mizuko the second floor. It was a little quieter up there, but no dancing. There were lounges, a space open to the central dance area below, but no dance area of its own.

When Drake was signing to her, describing more about the club, Mizuko saw Annabeth over his shoulder, approaching them. Mizuko nodded to him, taking in what he said, but when Annabeth arrived, her face

turned to the new arrival in a cue to Drake they had company. Mizuko wondered briefly how Annabeth might handle the greeting kiss and was mildly amused to imagine Drake's reaction.

She smiled. *"Annabeth. What an unexpected surprise. It's good to see you."*

"It's good to see you too," the vampire replied and greeted Mizuko with a European-style kiss on each cheek. Drake's curious gaze fell on Mizuko as he wondered about the greeting and the surge of Glamour that ran through Mizuko.

"Annabeth, this is Drake."

"So I finally get to learn your name," Annabeth said with a smile.

Drake smiled and shrugged. "Places like this aren't always conducive to talking."

"Very true," the vampire replied, and then she turned her attention back to Mizuko. "What brings you here tonight?"

"Dancing. Have you two already met in some way?"

"Here at the club," Drake replied. "We've danced a couple times."

"And there was that nasty incident down in the Blackout Lounge," Annabeth added.

"I haven't known Drake long but I know he's a quite a trouble-shooter." Mizuko shot a little smile at him. "I hope no one was hurt in the incident?"

"Not seriously," Annabeth replied. Drake added nothing to her statement other than a silent nod.

"I guess the club is lucky you two come here, then." Mizuko was curious as to what happened, but could see they didn't want to discuss it here, so she didn't push.

"I'll be here often," Annabeth supplied. "I'm part owner now."

Mizuko's jaw dropped and she stared. Her recovery was awkward but she added an honest smile. *"Congratulations, Annabeth. I think I like this club."*

"Why are you so surprised?" Annabeth asked, and Drake stood quietly by, watching the two converse.

"No no," Mizuko said. "Unexpected is all."

"Perhaps," Annabeth. "I made an offer when Simon Bell ran the club but it didn't work out. After he left, I made the offer to Cassandra MacArthur. She and her fellow owners agreed it was more than a fair deal." She looked around at the people around them. "This place is going to be more successful than Bell could ever pull off."

Mizuko relaxed slightly. *"I believe you. Perhaps we'll be here to see it happen."* She couldn't help but wonder if Annabeth was going to tell Remy she was here with another man.

"It was nice chatting with you," Annabeth said, "but I'm afraid I have to move on. I've got a meeting with a the rep of a band who might be playing here, and then I'm off on a date of my own." She grinned and took a step in close so she could whisper in Mizuko's ear "I'm glad to see you're taking my advice," and then moved on past the nymph to the stairs down to the main floor.

Mizuko couldn't help but feel good about Annabeth's parting words. She turned to Drake and signed, "I've been wrong about people before, but I think she is a genuinely nice person."

Drake nodded. "She seems to be. At the very least, she cares about the people who come here."

After a brief circuit, Mizuko was ready to leave the second floor. "Basement area next?" she inquired.

"The basement is more or less just the Blackout Lounge," he said. "I'll take you down to see it, but I'd prefer not to stay long. Something about it brings back bad memories."

She caught his arm. "*Drake, what happened?*"

"Nothing, here." His normally warm and expressive face had shut down, becoming a cool mask.

She touched his cheek and guided his face toward hers. The small nymph, even in her heels, had to almost climb her much taller date to press her lips to his. The kiss was warm and soft, but also all too brief. "*I'm sorry, Drake. Let's not go there. Can we dance together instead?*"

He looked down at her and his eyes searched her face, then his expression lost its edge. "I'd like that."

Mizuko pushed some lounge chairs aside right there. "*I've... never danced in a club. Can we practice a little?*"

Drake chuckled. "It's easy. Why don't we just head on down to the dance floor and give it a go?" He smiled. "This isn't something you can fail at."

"That's a relief," she signed.

Down on the main floor, they paced onto the dance floor, picked up the beat and began to move. Now that it was relevant to her, the movement of other women on the dance floor caught her eye and she watched, learned and integrated into her own movements. It took just one song for her to lose the uncertainty in her movements. After two more songs, she'd already built a small repertoire of moves. By the fourth song, she was thoroughly committed to dancing and her attention fully on her partner. She integrated moves entirely of her own, inspired by the strength, grace, and when appropriate, speed of her motions in water mixed with the things she'd picked up tonight.

Drake's and Mizuko's efforts had brought some heat to their faces, but the brightness in Mizuko's eyes and the genuine, wide smile that graced her lips showed how much fun she was having. She hadn't noticed at all that they'd wandered near the edge of the dance floor and had an audience of appreciative watchers. As the next song was cued, a tall man, thin but muscular, cut in. He was wearing a leather jacket with cutoff arms and a fishnet shirt beneath, along with loose-fitting jeans. His face alone sported more jewelry than Mizuko ever wore, and then he three rings on each hand.

"Hey, beautiful, can I have this dance?" He inserted himself between them and started moving as the music built.

Drake stood behind the intruder and looked at Mizuko over the man's shoulder with a raised eyebrow. He didn't want to make a scene, despite how badly he wanted to take his sword to the man's knees.

Mizuko frowned and stepped back. He smelled strange to her and didn't like that he was so close to her. That didn't seem to bother him. He began dancing. Mizuko looked past him at Drake and uncertainly began to dance. She was about to make a quick run past him to disengage without causing a scene, when he grabbed her waist and ass and ground. She yelped in surprise and jerked her eyes back at the interloper.

"C'mon baby. I know you know this dance." He ground against her in a lewd display and Mizuko began to seriously wonder how she was going to get out of this without hurting the guy.

The unwelcome stranger caught Mizuko's eye looking past his shoulder and turned slightly, and noticed Drake's poised body language held nothing good for him. "Hey man," he said, releasing Mizuko to turn his attention temporarily toward Drake. "Why you giving me the evil eye? She wants this." He focused his attention on Mizuko, catching her chin in his hand so that he could stare hard straight into her eyes. "Don't you."

Mizuko frowned and batted his hand away. "No," she said very clearly. The man stared at her, both puzzled at her refusal and startled by the eerie, luring sound of the single syllable she uttered.

"The lady's made her choice," Drake said, and extended a hand to Mizuko as he stepped to the side. "I'm sure there's another woman who'd love to go home with you. In fact, I think there's one over there by the bar." There was, in fact, a woman giving them both the eye. She wasn't quite as attractive as Mizuko, but it was obvious even from this distance she was turned on by what she saw.

The man with the hardware on his face ignored whoever Drake was pointing out. He eyed Drake and tried one more time. He gave the changeling his full attention. "Look. Be reasonable. This isn't worth a fight. All I want is one dance with the girl. If she'd rather dance with you after that, then she's all yours. Deal?"

Drake met the man's gaze calmly, acknowledging violence wasn't desirable - at this point. "The girl's a lady," he said as softly as he could given the noise of the place, "and the decision's up to her. If she says yes, you've got your one dance."

The man turned toward Mizuko, about to say something but she cut him off. "*I said no.*"

The power of her voice washed over him again and he faltered, staring at her. She saw his eyes widen, then he turned and strode away. Mizuko's expression changed from mild irritation to concern as she quickly moved close to Drake again in hopes no one else would try to cut in for a while.

The stranger seemed disturbed as he left, but Drake couldn't tell by what. "What's wrong?" Drake signed quickly, referring to Mizuko's concern.

Mizuko signed, "I am a fool. And stupid because I know better than to use my voice in this kind of setting. He noticed. I know why he smells like death to me. That man is a werewolf, and I think he knows I am not a mortal now."

"I hate to say it," Drake responded in sign, "but it might be best if we left before he's had a chance to find some way to cause some trouble later. Maybe we can find a back way out that won't trigger the fire alarms."

"What if he reacts like an animal?" Mizuko worried. "Like how a guard dog will chase you if you run?"

"Who said we'd be running?" Drake replied with a smile as his fingers moved. "If we're away before he realizes we're gone, then there's less of a chance for a confrontation that will spill over and get mortals involved, or we're forced into a more public use of our abilities. This is neither the time nor the place for a confrontation."

Mizuko considered what he said. She didn't think the werewolf would make a scene in front of all these people, but she'd already made a foolish mistake tonight. She didn't trust her own judgment. She nodded, then signed. "If he does he come after us, I'll protect you." Her face was serious.

"How about we protect each other," Drake replied, his face just as sober. He placed a hand in the small of her back and guided her off the dance floor, then caught the attention of a server. Instead of ordering a drink,

he asked where Annabeth might be. The server pointed them toward the office on the other side of the dance floor. Mizuko was curious as to why they were looking for Annabeth, but went along without comment.

"Drakey!" cried a woman with a tall drink in her hand. She left the company of three other women she was with at one of those tall tables that had stools instead of normal-height chairs around it. She was a tall brunette with her hair in a pony tail that was coming undone. Her step wasn't steady and she virtually collided with Drake when she intercepted him. While a handsome woman with a certain animal magnetism to her aggressive posture, she wouldn't have been called exactly beautiful, but more interesting. Mizuko couldn't tell if she was drunk or just not used to the tall, narrow heels on her boots.

"I haven't seen you in a while. How you doing?" she asked, ignoring Mizuko's presence.

"Pretty good, Deirde," Drake responded with ease, though his gaze did flick toward the office door.

Deirdre wobbled again and Mizuko decided she was drunk. Drake caught her so didn't fall and she stole the chance to give him a kiss and managed to plant one on his cheek only because he turned his face away at the last moment.

The woman threw a glance toward Mizuko and tossed a "Hi" her direction, then told Drake, "You should come over. I could introduce you to my friends! I've told them all about you."

Mizuko did a very good job looking impassive and untroubled by Dierdre.

"Maybe next time," Drake replied apologetically, spending a moment extracting himself and setting Deirdre upright again before returning to Mizuko's side. "But it was nice to see you again." He put a comfortable arm around the nymph's shoulders and turned to continue toward the office.

Mizuko's shoulders shook as she stifled a laugh. When Drake checked, he saw her smile. He asked her what that was about and she signed, "You are a popular guy, Drake. But I totally see why they like you." She was impressed with his deft handling of the situation and also happy she didn't have to punch the woman in the throat. Enjoying his arm around her shoulders, she put one of hers around his waist and fought the temptation to grab his butt or stick her fingers in one of his pockets.

Drake pulled her a bit closer, letting their bodies nest together naturally, as they continued toward the office. Just as Drake lifted his hand to knock, the door opened to reveal Annabeth dressed in a coat and with her purse over her shoulder.

"Hi. I was just on my way out." Annabeth looked between Drake and Mizuko with a smile.

"Sorry to bother you," Drake said, "but I was wondering if you had a super secret way out of there." He gave her a disarming grin. "A guy tried to get a dance with Mizuko and I don't think he took getting turned down easily. We don't want to cause any problems for you, so I thought if we could duck out the back..."

Annabeth smiled and nodded. "I can help you out. Come on, this way." She led them through a door to the backstage area. There was a pair of double doors recently installed. "No fire alarm on these," she said. "They lead out into the alley behind the club. We had it installed to help the bands get their equipment in and out."

"I appreciate it, Annabeth," Drake said, extending his hand.

"Least I could do," she replied. "I don't want trouble just as much as you do." She unlocked the door and opened it, letting Drake and Mizuko slip out into the cold night.

Drake spent a tiny mote of Glamour and his body warmed up. With Mizuko tucked so close against him, she was able to share in that heat. She loved it, imagining herself basking in his radiance as if he were the sun

and she the moon.

When they paused to orient themselves in the alley, Mizuko reflected on the fact they probably hadn't been in the club for more than an hour at most. She wasn't ready to call it a night and hoped he wasn't either.

As if reading her mind, Drake said "It's still early. Is there somewhere else you'd like to go, or should we head back to your place. Perhaps watch a movie?"

Mizuko thought about that. She knew that Amber wasn't likely to come home until very late, if at all, so she didn't expect any interruptions from her. The only concern was that her experience with Remy there the previous night was still fresh in her mind. The way he'd treated her when he was done and then left bothered her. She looked up at Drake and couldn't help but smile at the handsome catch. Maybe she could have more pleasant memories there to replace the old.

She withdrew just enough to sign to him. "That would be fine. I'm not attached to the place though. The hot tub is broken," she told him, as if that was an important consideration right now. "I would love going anywhere with you."

"I'm sure we can figure out something to do that doesn't involve the hot tub." Drake chuckled and gently pulled her back to his side. Mizuko smiled up at him.

—

Back at her apartment, Mizuko busied herself pouring wine for them both while Drake found a movie to watch on the TV. Mizuko had admitted she generally just pushed buttons. She had encountered remotes before, but not since before she was Taken, and this thing seemed especially baffling to her. Usually, she just used the channel up and down and had to be satisfied with whatever she found. Otherwise, she told Drake she'd end up with the lights turning off and on, music coming up in odd places of the apartment, or bringing up what looked like a phone on the TV which she had no idea how to use.

He finally came up with two possibilities: an action movie with spies and car chases and a romantic piece with knights and dragons. "Which would you prefer?" Drake asked as he accepted a glass from Mizuko.

"Well, I like dragons, especially big and scary ones. I'm less a fan of the chivalric knight these days. On the other hand, if you don't mind that I get a little wound up during action movies that's okay, too." She smiled. "Do I have to make a choice?"

"They're both on at the same time," he said, "so if we're going to watch one, you'll have to. But, what exactly do you mean by getting a bit wound up during action movies?" He wondered if she got loud and yelled at the tv when the characters were about to do something stupid - or when they were about to do something she wanted them to.

"I get lost in movies sometimes. Forget they are just stories." Mizuko made a face. "I made it sound worse than it is, though. I'm not going to freak out on you or anything. I just get... jumpy." She took a drink of her wine — a deep red — and enjoyed the warm feeling it evoked in her stomach.

"That's okay." Drake had seen the spy movie before, and knew about the rather steamy love scenes about half-way through. If Mizuko got caught up in the movie, it will be interesting to see how she reacts during those parts. "Spy movie then?"

Mizuko nodded. They crossed over to the couch, and Mizuko put down her wine, but then exclaimed, *"Oh! Amber says you can't watch movies without munchies. I burned the last bag of popcorn, but we have this bowl of fruit..."*

Drake watched her retreat to the kitchen and return with a fruit bowl that included melons, grapes, and strawberries. But there was something else, as well, something he didn't recall seeing at any grocery store. They were purple things a little smaller than a peach, but wrinkled and veiny.

"What is that?" he asked, pointing at the purple fruit.

She picked one up and took a bite out of it. She closed her eyes as a little shiver ran through her body. She sniffed, then smiled and offered it to him. *"I call it snuffleblush."*

"Why?" he asked a moment before he took a bite. A rush of lust ran through his body and heightened his senses and awareness of the woman next to him.

She looked at him with big purple eyes and rosy cheek and sniffed again. She pulled a couple tissues from the box on the corner of the coffee table and handed him one as she closed with him until her body was against his. *"That's why,"* she said in a knowing tone. She then slid away from him, teasingly, and plopped down on the couch, placing the bowl within reach. *"I find lots of interesting fruit in the Hedge. This is one of the better finds."*

Drake blew his nose and asked "how long does the side effect last?"

"I don't know exactly," Mizuko admitted. *"Ten or fifteen minutes, maybe? If you eat a whole one. Last time I had these I didn't have the other fruit to mix in and I ate a whole bowl of them, they were so good. I went through a box of tissues and had to, ah, take care of the other before the feeling went away. So, the more you eat, the stronger the effect I think."*

"How much do you think you want to eat tonight?"

Mizuko smiled widely. *"How much do I want to eat, or how much do I have? Um, there are only a few of those left, which I mixed in with the normal fruit. I already pigged out on those things and ate most of what I had a couple days ago."*

"What a shame," Drake said, teasing Mizuko. He held out his arms to her. "Now come here. The movie's about to start."

She slid into his arms, feeling his warmth against her skin. It just felt right to her. The movie's energetic opening had her body jumping at the surprises and quivering with tension during the high-intensity chase scenes without the courtesy of consulting her mind. Yet, also without consulting the organ that was supposedly in charge, her body settled and relaxed against him at his touch. With her eyes glued to the screen, she nibbled absently at the occasional piece of fruit she speared with a toothpick as the movie settled into a less frantic beat and the story unfolded.

Drake enjoyed watching the movie with Mizuko in his lap, enjoying her reactions almost as much as the story in the movie. When she relaxed back against him, he pressed a light kiss on her shoulder before spearing a piece of fruit for himself.

The movie progressed through steamy scenes of passion as intense and active as the rest of the story. Drake wasn't disappointed in Mizuko's reaction to them. Her body warmed and she squirmed delightfully in his lap, though she didn't seem consciously aware of it. He knew that all it would take was one little distraction, one little touch to take her attention away from the movie and she would be his. It seemed Mizuko's entire evening had been working towards this, and the snuffleblush fruit certainly added to the mix.

He contemplated it only for a moment before setting the thoughts aside. From what she'd said earlier, all of her previous dates had ended up being about sex, and he wanted to give her more. He wasn't so hard up (literally or figuratively) that he would take advantage of her. Instead, for the rest of the movie, he kept his affections light and subtle, nothing to detract from her enjoyment of the movie.

He found that she returned his attention in little ways. From time to time she might touch him to let him know she knew who she was with, such as a light stroke along his thigh. Or when he kissed her shoulder or her neck, she showed her appreciation by settling in and resting her head against his chest, or during more active scenes when she was sitting more upright, against his cheek. She enjoyed taking his arms and wrapping them around her.

By the time the movie finished and credits were rolling, it was late. It was time to find something else to do or end the date and even Mizuko sensed that. She turned around in his arms and straddled him, then looked into his eyes. They were practically nose to nose and she could see herself reflected back in the mirror-like discs of his irises. She soaked in the sight of his face, the feel of his strong shoulders under her questing fingers. She realized what it was she wanted from Remy but didn't have. She knew what the remedy was for that abandoned, used feeling she got when he finished with her and left. It was something that Remy was unable or unwilling to do.

"Drake, I'm going to ask you something. It's weird and awkward and personal and I hope you I haven't gone too far in asking this of you."

"Ask," Drake replied. "I'll answer if I can, and I'll be honest."

She took a breath, *"I think you know how attractive and desirable you are to me. Any woman would kill to have one night in your bed and under normal circumstances that probably would go double for me. But it's okay if that's not what you want right now."* It seemed important to her to convince him of her sincerity. *"It's really okay. I want you to know that I would respect that. It's just... I would like to not have to sleep alone tonight. More than anything I would like for you to be in my arms and me in yours."*

He smiled. "I can do that," he replied. "But I have to be up early. I've got an eight o'clock fencing class."

"Really? You don't mind?" she asked, getting excited. *"It's not too sappy and foolish?"*

"As long as you promise not to ravish me in my sleep." He chuckled. "No, it's not sappy or foolish. Sex is all well and good, but sometimes what you really need is a good long cuddle and companionship."

She stared at him in astonishment and wondered if he could read her mind. *"How did you know that? I just figured that out myself."*

"Because it's the way I feel."

She pinched his arm.

"Ow!" he exclaimed, rubbing his arm in mock dismay. "What was that for?"

"I'm sorry. I just wanted to double check that you were real." She smiled brilliantly. *"I usually spend an hour or two in the hot tub before I go to bed, but I blew it up the other day. So, I think I'll shower instead. Would you like to as well?"*

"I don't know. Are you going to take advantage of me when my back is turned, or when I bend over to pick up the soap?" Drake's eyes sparkled with mischief.

She looked baffled at first. The apartment had two bathrooms, but then she realized where he was going and liked his idea much better. Her smile matched his mischief and it showed on her face that she found the idea entertaining. But she admitted, *"Not if there was any chance of it getting in the way of my cuddles."*

"Then perhaps you'd better shower alone this time," he said. As much as he liked the idea of a shared shower, he didn't think he'd be able to keep his mind on the real prize - giving Mizuko something she's obviously never had before. "I'll wait for you in the bedroom. Do you and Amber have any books or magazines I could read?"

She shook her head, then hopped up and found a newspaper on a chair that was left by the workmen. She handed it to him, then told him, *"My bedroom's upstairs."* She winked, then trotted for the spiral staircase, shedding shoes along the way. Just past the top of the stairs she stopped, lifted her dress and worked on unfastening her stockings from her garter. She hopped in a circle three times, shifted uncomfortably and snarled at the clasps in back.

"Hold on a second," Drake said, climbing the stairs behind her two steps at a time. "Let me help you."

She stopped hopping and stood still with her dress gathered up in her hand.

He carefully untangled the tops of the stockings and undid the clasps. "Next time," he said as he rolled the stockings down her legs with ease, "you might want to think about thigh-high stockings. They'll stay up on their own and you don't need garters."

Amber had told her that garters were more fun. Watching while he unfastened them, she decided that for all the irritation of putting them on, Amber had been right. But she smiled and signed, "I'll think about that next time."

The dress she had figured out and her bra fastened in the front. These dropped to the floor on her way to the master bath, providing her guest with a lovely view from behind, but she disappeared into bathroom before she removed her panties.

Drake chuckled as he admired the view. She was very good, he thought with a smile. He took his time removing most of his clothes, putting them in a tidy pile. Wearing only the tight bikini briefs he preferred, he lay down on the bed and started to read.

It turned out she wasn't kidding about the time she liked to spend in the water. She didn't reappear for an hour and he could hear the shower during that entire time. But she reappeared only a minute after the water turned off, naked but dry, including her hair. She walked directly to the bed and slid under the covers.

"You're pretty good at getting dry fast," Drake said, slowly folding up the paper and setting it aside. "Or did you fall asleep on the toilet for the past hour?" He grinned and joined her under the covers.

She snuggled close. *"I'm a water nymph,"* she simply. *"I used to live mainly in Ottowi pond, and the spring of my hollow when I grew hungry."*

"Sounds very lonely." He wrapped his arms around her and rested his cheek against the side of her head. "How did you end up living here?"

"That's a long story. I'll try to sum up. Before I was Taken, I was a runaway. After I escaped I headed back home but I found my Fetch there. She'd... fixed things between me and my family. She was smart, successful, loved. Everything I was not. I fled back to the streets but I found that living in the pond and the hollow on the other side, was something I understood, something I learned from my Keeper. So I did that."

"Okay, but that doesn't explain how you got from living in a pond to living in an apartment that probably

costs at least \$1500 a month."

"My queen ordered me to find certain people and ask them to accept me as part of a motley and to rejoin society. She told me I had to limit my contact with the Hedge. She said I would go mad if I didn't. So I did as she told me. As for the apartment, well. I'm not sure how long this will last. It belongs to the vampire I mentioned. He disliked the place Amber and I found to live. He'd helped me out and we were dating, so I accepted his offer to find another place."

"Were dating. Does this mean you've broken off your relationship with him?"

"Were dating, as in we used to do things together. But then I... I don't know. I thought maybe it was more than it is. His friend stopped by this week. Annabeth. We talked. She told me that what I was doing, sitting here hoping he'd come by, so grateful for a visit or word and what he'd done for me..." Her words faltered and she struggled as emotions bubbled beneath the surface. *"She told me this was beneath me, that I was better than that. She upset me a lot. But I listened and I thought about it. I started to think she might be right in the worst way but I didn't really believe it until last night."*

She sobbed suddenly. *"I'm such a fool! I thought Remy loved me. I really did. Then last month I asked him to say so and he couldn't. He's been so cold. Annabeth says he speaks what he means through his actions. He doesn't love me. He fucks me. That's all. And I'm such a fool I let him do it."* She cried.

Drake held her close as she cried, giving what quiet comfort he could. There wasn't anything else he could do, he thought.

She subsided after a while, then she laughed. *"I'm a lousy date. Next time, you can cry if you want."*

His laugh was a soft rumble in his chest. "I appreciate that." Drake pressed a kiss on the top of her head. "You're not a lousy date. I've enjoyed tonight. Not that I like it when a lady cries, but it happens sometimes. Now, are you ready?"

She turned in his arms so she could see him. "Ready?"

"For your first night of cuddling." He smiled at her. "And hopefully not your last."

She sighed his name, told him he had a soft spot for troubled women, and settled gratefully onto his chest.

After a few moments of silence, Drake asked, "How did you meet Annabeth?"

"Through Remy," Mizuko responded. *"They are friends."*

"Is she a vampire as well?"

Mizuko nodded. She was surprised at first that he didn't know, but then again why would he? *"Yes. But I would trust her as I trust Remy and his small group of friends. They have a pact with me. They are ensorcelled and under a vow to keep our secrets."*

"So, if she's a vampire, and she's part owner of the club now," Drake said thoughtfully, "does that mean Glasshouse is now, or has been, a vampire hang out?"

"I suppose that is true," Mizuko admitted, *"but I haven't found a club or bar that isn't a place where vampires or other predators visit. Like us, they harvest from mortals as well. Well, not me. I'm not so good at it, so I don't bother. I harvest my glamour from the Hedge."*

"Hm." Drake's were on that night in the Blackout Lounge. He'd stepped in to help two women in trouble in

one of the dark corners of that horrible place. One of them had walked away with a cut on the side of her neck, though they hadn't found any weapons on the man who'd been molesting her. Could he have been a vampire? Or perhaps a werewolf. But what would a werewolf be hunting for in a club. Horror tales of man-eating monsters flashed through his head. He knew better than to believe all of them, but he knew there was often a kernel of truth in the heart of the story.

"You think every place where humans congregate are hunting grounds for supernatural predators?" he asked, bringing his mind back to the conversation at hand.

She nodded. *"Predators circle the herd, looking for likely targets. Maybe sometimes, instead of food, they come looking for sex and companionship instead. Like that werewolf. I know for sure they get at least as horny as anyone else. Hopefully they don't actually eat people they find in clubs. Otherwise there'd be a lot more news about mangled bodies and stuff."* For a changeling who rarely spoke in court or duchy functions except lately as Veridia's Legate, she did seem to know an awful lot about supernatural predators.

"How do you know so much about werewolves?"

"That's about all I know," Mizuko admitted. *"Rey knows a lot more about them. She has friends among them. All I know is that when I found out she was the target of a vampire looking to manipulate her or worse and I gave her lycan friends the information they needed, they rose up, attacked, and destroyed the threat within hours. I'd say they are good friends. But like I said, I don't really know much. Like that werewolf tonight? I've never seen him before. I used sorcery to detect what he was."*

"Both of you seem to have some very interesting friends." Drake soothed a lock of Mizuko's hair back and tucked it behind her ear.

"If you say so," Mizuko said. *"Used to be more interesting than that."*

"What do you mean?"

"Rey used to have this criminal empire thing going, but it was very short-lived. I used to work for her, but she went legit and so then I didn't have a job or anything to do. I ended up having to get a legit job too and that was the hardest thing I've ever had to do. It makes me crazy. No one wants to hire someone with no ID. I didn't even have a home. I ended up waitressing for a changeling that pays me under the table. I eventually got an apartment with Amber, which Remy didn't like, and you know the rest. So now my life is mostly extremely boring. I used to run protection for hookers, you know. That was very interesting. Then lately since this place is paid for, mostly all I'd been doing was sit around." Clearly, a bored Mizuko was a very unhappy Mizuko. But it wasn't all bad because at least she'd had the time to figure out what she wanted and what was wrong with her relationship with Remy.

Drake had to take the pieces she'd told him and put it together in order for it to make sense, but once he did Drake could tell that the past nine months had held some major changes. First she was forced to give up her lifestyle living more or less like a wild woman. It wasn't a healthy lifestyle, but still it was what she'd been used to for at least two and half years. Then she'd adopted a life apparently as some kind of pimp. When that fell through, she was on the street again, this time trying to find a job with no ID, probably because she still had a fetch out there living her life, which likely meant Mizuko wasn't her real name, either. Somewhere in all this she seemed to have tried to live more like mortals but managed to get involved with vampires and then fight in the Battle of Cirledell as well as the Siege of Iron Mountain.

All of that happened in only a few short months. Since then, she appeared to have been attempting to work through the radical changes in her life with occasional visits or "dates" with this Remy that she finally realized weren't good for her. That wasn't likely to change unless she got out of this place and did something to change or end this relationship she had with the vampire. It was interesting that Annabeth, whom Mizuko had said was Remy's friend, seemed to encourage her to not let Remy treat her the way he had been.

"I'm sure you'll find something to do," Drake said, closed his eyes and rested his cheek against her head. He wasn't tired, not really, and his body was certainly aware of soft, inviting woman in his arms, but he wasn't going to indulge himself. Some other night definitely, but not tonight.

Mizuko and Less were at the security office a few minutes later. It took some convincing to let them in to talk with the transit police security monitoring personnel, but they did eventually. There were acutely aware of the murders, of course. However, they were able to give them only exactly as much as they gave the police, which is to say nothing. There were no cameras aimed near that location. The freshness of the blood at the time was an indicator of when the emblems were drawn, even if the state of decay of the bodies indicated death long before they arrived, but there was no movement on the nearest cameras toward that location at all. The Transit cops explained that it simply isn't feasible or even possible to monitor every square yard of the tunnels and platforms of the system. This is one of the places that are simply not monitored.

Less had expected as much so he thanked the security personnel and went top-side with Mizuko.

"Do you have any plans tonight, Mizuko?" he asked. "I was thinking of trying to ask the vampire corpses in the morgue some questions, if they're up for it?"

"I do," Mizuko signed. "I plan to assist you investigate these killings." She smiled a little.

—

Rey strode out of the subway, counting to 152 in order to get her nerves back on an even keel. She hated vampires as a whole, and was thrilled when there was something - or someone - was hunting them down and killing them. Unfortunately, the way in which they had been killed and put on display concerned her, and the fact she actually did care about it irritated her.

So that led her to what she was doing now - trying to find out what was going on. While Mizuko and Less went to the morgue, Rey started her research. She tried to find out more about the symbols, if they really were a variation of Qabbalism, or if it was just someone's scribbles. She didn't fault Mizuko's memory, so something like them had to exist. It was just a matter of finding it. The research came up with nothing, however. The symbols simply didn't match anything she could find in only a few hours work.

Rey also searched the web, looking for reports of murders like the ones that just happened. If the killer was moving from place to place, she thought she might be able to get information about those crimes that could help. The good news was that there didn't seem to be any murders like it in the area recently.

A phone call put Rey in contact with her friends on the police force. She hoped she might be able to get a copy of - or perhaps a quick look at - the file on the murders. The officer she knew said they might be able to do that, but it put their job on the line. If Rey wanted to see it, she would have to come down to the station. The officer would need something from Rey, something that might help with the investigation, that he could use as an excuse to get access to the file.

There was something about the crime scene that bothered her. Everything she knew kept rolling around in her head until she felt almost dizzy with it. Rey crossed her arms, closed her eyes and rested her forehead on her forearms. So many loose ends, so many new questions. She hoped Marie might know something, a bit of information that might put them closer to an answer before the murderer struck again.

—

It was nearly supper time before Mizuko and Less got to the morgue. Mizuko suggested they find something to eat afterwards, if they feel like it, so they don't have to waste perfectly good food. Given the decayed state of the corpses seen in the photographs, she was clearly thinking that viewing (and smelling) them in person might make a grown person barf.

They were given a hard time by the morgue people. The security man seemed to think that Mizuko and Less were weirdos with a death fetish. Since no amount of subterfuge was going to let them both slip past this guy, Less and Mizuko smoothly switched tactics. Mizuko stayed to argue and absorb all the man's attention while Less discretely slipped past the security door behind an unsuspecting custodian. He Winter Mantle settled about him, ensuring that no one looking for him would take any note of the stranger drifting down the halls to the refrigerated room and autopsy rooms.

Less's mission was made a little easier by the fact that they bodies were currently out on autopsy tables. One was being worked on by the resident doctor while the other awaited its turn. Less was able to get a good look at that one.

It did indeed look very dead. Unlike the vampire they took prisoner, which merely looked like a fresh corpse, this one was in such a state of messy, juicy decay that it seemed highly unlikely there was enough material there for any amount of will or magic to animate it. The smell was overpowering as well, and wormed its way into Less's brain. It was a stench he would not forget. The slack, dislocated jaw and mostly rotted skin guaranteed this corpse wasn't going to be communicating with anyone or anything. And since the doctor was cutting and removing organs for closer study, it was a safe bet that a chance of any kind of "revival" was going to be even more remote than it was now.

Upon returning to Mizuko Less tried to shake off the smell of the autopsy room. After they had gone outside Less asked, "Would you like to come to my place for supper? I need some coffee or something to knock the smell of formaldehyde out of my nose. I happen to have a few Hedge fruit."

Mizuko smiled, none the worse for her little encounter. She nodded happily and accompanied the King to his abode.

Less invited Mizuko into his tiny apartment. It's neat, if spartan, interior was a welcome relief from the grubby and dilapidated building as a whole. He found her a bottle of inexpensive beer but took only lemon and water for himself. While he put on the rice and beans he asked Mizuko to select some music that she might like to hear. However, once the pot was on the stove Less had to step in and show her what an LP was and how the record player worked.

"I really appreciate your help with this vampire murder case," said Less as he chopped vegetables and Hedge fruit at the counter. "You haven't had any more trouble with those brainbugs have you?"

Mizuko shook her head. "They have not returned. I hope they are all destroyed."

In the space immediately following her statement, she tilted her head in curiosity and asked, "Are you dating anyone?"

Less chuckled softly. "No, my Saturday nights stretch off into a vast empty sea of paperwork. You will just have to date enough for the two of us! I expect you will be meeting any number of admirers tonight."

Mizuko looked surprised. "I will? Does that mean you already have a lead?"

"Oh! No. No leads. I only thought you would have had already made plans for a Saturday night." He paused to turn the heat down on the rice. "We don't have much to go on," he said, changing back to the topic of the murders. "We're looking for one person - based on the fact that all the symbols were of the same style and only one trail of blood left the scene. This person is powerful enough to rip apart a couple of vampires

without much trouble, and is acquainted with, but doesn't necessarily practice, Qabbalistic magic. Apparently, he got bored waiting for someone to show up - in this case it was one of my informants - and doodled magic-looking symbols before slipping away down a subway tunnel." Less shrugged to indicate his hopelessness. "Unless you or Rey can come up with someone who uses this kind of magic, my only leads are the trail of blood leading into an extremely dangerous tunnel, and the fact that a group of Ishtar witches hang out at the Blood Tears sex club."

"I see," Mizuko signed. "I don't have a date for tonight or anything. I'm currently trying to find a good way to change my relationship with Remy so that I can date someone else. So right now I'd much rather try to find a killer."

After a little thought she continued. "Well, I really do think I've seen symbols like those before." She frowned as she tried to remember where.

Less tried to help her remember. "Where could you have seen magical writing? Autumn court library? Somewhere with Remy and his vampires? In the Hedge? Before you were Taken? When you were homeless in the park?"

She shook her head, then signed, "I don't think before I was Taken or in the Hedge. I know I've seen writing like that before. It's very frustrating. I just wish I could remember. I feel like... I feel like I'm not supposed to remember, but I don't know why. Wait a minute. Less? Why do you consider mortal witches that follow Ishtar a lead in this case?"

Less thought that sounded like vampire or possibly Autumn Court interference. "Oh, only because they are the only people in town that I know use human magic. They might know something about the writing, or know about someone who does." He turned his attention back to dinner. It was nearly ready to serve so he began getting out plates and cutlery.

Mizuko nodded. "Right. That makes sense," she signed. She followed him to the cupboard and took plates and dinnerware he selected to the table to set it. After she finished, she waited until he turned back to her again before she signed, "I've met only a few of them but they seem nice. One of them owns the Blood Tears Club, so I think they use part of it as a gathering place. It seems a little odd to me that they chose a sex club, though. Do you think it might just be a cover? A place no one wants to look at too hard?"

"It's probably only because Queen Cassandra, now Ishtar, has a long, storied past with the club. Where did you meet the Ishtarites?"

"I met them at the club. Rey's sister let us in because you have to be a member to be allowed, unless you are a guest of a member. That was only my second time at the club."

Membership. If Clare is going to infiltrate the club she'll definitely need one of those, thought Less. "You've been there?" Two and two made four. "Rey's sister is an Ishtar witch!? Whoa, small world. I guess that means Rey will probably find out if they know anything about the magic writing. How many women are in the coven, do you think?"

"I don't know," Mizuko reported. "I know that it may be much larger than just the three I saw because it was mentioned that a good number of them connected out of mutual concern over a serial killer that was murdering lesser gifted supernaturals. The one, I think, that we put down last summer. I'd say more than three, but I don't know how many more. Would you like me to ask Ishtar? She might just tell us and then we would count any isolated groups that maybe the Blood Tears witches don't know about."

"Yes, please do." Less didn't think that would help them much in their investigation but he just couldn't resist getting his hands on that tidbit of information. He served up the simple meal and they sat down to eat.

"What do you think the goal of the Ishtar cult is? Did you get a sense of what they are trying to accomplish

from Blood Tears?"

Mizuko put down the fork she was using to scoop up the rice and beans while she considered. "I think that at first it was really for mutual defense. Watch each other's backs and lie low from the serial killer hunting them. After that I think they began to see the value in maintaining that connection because I saw an altar and other ritual things. They are probably doing a little magic together, a little pooling of knowledge, that sort of thing. Then Ishtar comes along and makes their goddess really come to life. So now they have something tangibly connected to what they worship. And maybe Ishtar gets a whole lot of glamour. Can you image what she might be capable of doing as part of that weird Entitlement she's got? I bet that with a score of worshippers, she can make a pretty convincing goddess show." Mizuko shrugged. "I also got the impression that she is supposed to protect them somehow. I imagine she got more creative than I am about however that's done."

"Hm, so you think the coven existed before Ishtar. That's interesting. Cassandra makes a goddess show for a group of witches, makes a pledge to protect them in exchange for worship, and bingo: plenty of glamour to feed on. Smart. How do they feel about vampires?"

Mizuko considered while she shoveled in another spoonful of beans and rice, then topped it off by popping in slice of something juicy from the Hedge that Less had added to dinner. "That's a good question. I don't know. I know that Rey's sister, Marie sure enjoys having sex with one. But the thing is, I don't think she's really aware he's a vampire. I'm not sure how common it is for a witch to be able to sense a vampire."

"Complicated." Less chewed for a while. "I guess that doesn't rule them out for wanting to ritually kill vampires. Hopefully Rey will be able to fill in some holes there," finished Less, blind to the pun he had made.

Mizuko agreed and finished her meal. After that, she made some phone calls on the little cell with the damaged screen. Whatever number she called, she must have memorized it. "*It's me,*" she told the person on the other end. "*Oh yes. I forgot that. I have a question. Yes, okay. I would like to contact the Ishtar unofficially. Really? We can do that and it's okay?*" Mizuko nodded at Less. "*What's the number?*" She repeated the number given aloud once Less had a pen and paper ready. "*I will,*" she told the person on the other end of the line. Then she closed the phone and set it down.

She signed, "Apparently Ishtar has a number for anyone in the Duchy to use to call her and leave a message. I guess she'll get back to us when she can. Would you like me to call and leave a message?"

Less shrugged. Why not test the system? "Sure. Who were you talking to?"

Less also had some calls to make. He wanted to see if Septimus had talked to Clare about Blood Tears and if any Bleak Seal agents had noticed any messages from Frank. It wasn't likely the vampires wanted any outside help, but if the ritual murders turned out to be another serial killer things might change.

Mizuko couldn't come up with a Glymjack sign for the name, so she voice it. "*Vicissitude.*" Mizuko opened the phone again and was about to dial the number when she caught Less's expression.

"Since when have you been on speaking terms?" he asked, genuinely curious.

Mizuko looked at him like he'd lost his mind. "Just now," she signed.

Less just stared at her quizzically.

"She answered the number my Queen gave me. Someone usually answers and this time it was her. Really, we have never not been on speaking terms. She usually makes very clear to me what her opinions are. It makes me angry sometimes, but I will admit she's never once lied." Mizuko looked away. Her face told what

she was thinking: The truth hurt more. "The darkling's information is good."

"It's good to know the Autumn Court functions well despite internal disputes," said Less. "Sissy may never have lied, but you know better than I that the spoken truth is not always very accurate. She is a mean-spirited person, Mizuko, and you're better than her. I figured she would have lightened up now that she's been promoted but that she hasn't shows how shallow she really is."

"We've all been shaped by our experiences," Mizuko signed, "and it comes out in different ways. She's petty and jealous but she did give us a phone number."

"So, she's not all bad." Less cleared the plates and arranged some Hedge fruit and some sugar cookies on a plate for dessert. Since they were stymied on the vampire killer investigation, he returned to the topic that seemed to be on Mizuko's mind. "So, you say you are trying to break up with Remy. Is he making it difficult on you?"

Mizuko picked up a cookie and took a bite, taking the opportunity to avert her gaze as if a little ashamed. Finally, she put it down and signed, "I haven't actually spoken to him about it yet. I'm being something of a coward about this. You see, I really do have feelings for him. But I can not get through to him. I don't see the same feelings from him. I wanted to know he felt the same way, but he can't express them."

"I went on a date with someone else. Drake. We didn't even have sex, but he made me feel he wanted me more than Remy wanted me. So I think what I must do in order to prevent real trouble later, is tell Remy I would like to date Drake. Dating Drake means I cannot have sex with Remy, though. Drake says so. So I have to tell Remy these things. It hurts my heart too much to think about it a lot."

Less sighed in sympathy with the poor girl. The pain and loss of of heartbreak was a daily experience for him. Memories of his abandonment came unbidden and he blinked back tears. He fled to the stove to put the kettle on. "I believe relationships between two people are meant to be equal," said Less once he had recovered. "That you can't get in touch with him means that he is the only one with the power in the relationship. That isn't right. If he can make demands on you, you must be able to make demands in return. If Drake wants you to be exclusive to him, and you want to be with Drake, then you must end your relationship with Remy. Certainly, this will not be easy on you, for you have shared many things which will now only be memory, but the new experiences you will share with Drake will more than make up for it. Eventually." The big question was how Remy would take the news. "If you like, I can go with you when you tell Remy it's over."

Mizuko looked at him with gratitude. "I really appreciate that. But I can't ask you to be there. He might lose his temper. If it is just me, I think I can get away. But if you were there and were the only target available to him..." Mizuko shook her head. She wasn't sure what she'd do if he really did lose his temper with her and tried to strike out. Her mind told her she could simply call upon her powers as an Autumn Courtier — no as a Legate — and become nothing more than leaves and air and fly away. But part of her spoke in a small voice. It was the part of her that sometimes spoke to her in the mirror and this one was telling her that if her heart were divided as it was, could she be sure she wouldn't just stand there and take it, feeling like she deserved whatever he did for abandoning him after making him think she would be loyal to him?

She folded her arms around herself. Maybe her fears were unwarranted. Maybe Remy even saw this coming and was only interested in their alliance anyway. Maybe she wouldn't freeze if things went sideways. Or maybe she'd black out and then turn into burning ice to destroy everything that touched her. Far too many 'maybes'. Talk? Flee? Fight? Cower? She just didn't know.

Mizuko was shaking inside but she watched Less with false calm. She signed, "I got myself into this one. I think I need to face it on my own."

Less brought her a hot cup of tea. "Fair enough, but only remember that you never need to be alone. You

have me and the motley."

Mizuko smiled and bowed her head in deference.

Later, while Mizuko called Queen Ishtar, Less had an opportunity to catch up with a call to Septimus. The stalwart Beast reported no new contact with the vampire Frank, but he said he did talk with Claire about infiltrating and identifying the Blood Tears witches. Apparently, Claire was not accustomed to sex clubs. She already checked admissions requirements and said that it was highly unusual for a single to be allowed to join by themselves. It would attract attention if she wasn't part of a couple. Septimus stated he'd been afraid that would be the case. Claire was asking if the King really wanted her to do this. If so, she needed a partner — or she could attempt to infiltrate the place covertly rather than undercover. That would be riskier as she did not know what sort of magical protections mortal witches might be able to employ.

Less agreed to assist Claire with her cover. It seemed that the operation may be unnecessary considering the toll-free information line Mizuko was even now accessing. However, Less' nose for espionage told him he needed independent confirmation of all sources.

By the time Less was done with his call to Septimus, Mizuko had completed her call as well.

"She says that she answers all those who call upon Ishtar for help and guidance in the correct way," Mizuko signed. "And she sounded glad that I asked her about this. She claims there are 38 currently active worshippers and roughly twice that who believe but have not chosen to commit. She said 23 of them have some amount of power of their own ranging from just a touch to a great deal."

"She really answered herself?" asked Less. "That's pretty good service for a god. And 23 out of 38 with supernatural power is an impressive force, considering. Thanks for doing that, Mizuko." Less wasn't sure how Ishtar fit into the Duchy's politics any more. Did these worshippers somehow bolster the Court of Spring or was this completely separate from changeling society now? "Did she specify what she means by 'the correct way'?"

"The number I have is for an answering service, and she called me back while you were still on the phone," Mizuko clarified. "But yes, that was fast." She shared the number with Less so that he could have it, too. "She didn't say what the correct way meant. I just assumed it was something witchy or new-agey. Remember the old stories about faeries? You do a certain thing to honor them and they give you blessings, but ill fortune to those who renege on their duty? Maybe it's like that."

"I wonder if she's got a website?" mused Less. "I suppose her followers are all mortal types. What do you think?"

"I haven't any idea," Mizuko signed. She was surprised and intrigued by the idea, though. "Even if she doesn't, I bet that at least some of her followers do. I mean, if I was a mortal and a goddess showed up and gave me cool powers or taught me spells or whatever it is Ishtar is doing, I'd blog about it."

"Let's find out!" said Less. He wasn't very computer-savvy but it was hard to live in this day and age without internet access. He had an old second-hand computer and CRT screen that he kept covered with a dust cloth most of the time. He whipped off the cloth, folded and flashed up the equipment. "It'll be a few minutes," he said apologetically as he moved the chairs from the table to a more suitable location in front of the keyboard. Mizuko followed him, curious to see what they might find.

Ten o'clock came and went. When Marie called Rey a little before the hour, she'd invited her sister to her place to talk. So, Rey found herself parking in front of what appeared to be a fairly new double-wide trailer.

Marie's car was parked there — a green Mustang GT with personal plates that read WYLD1. Paving stones made a path from the drive to the steps to the front door. While Rey rang the doorbell, she got a look at a sticker in the window of the exterior door that read, "NO SOLICITORS".

Marie answered the door and let her in with a grin and a sweep of her hand. "Come on in."

Rey looked around as she stepped inside, curious as to what her sister surrounded herself with. It came as little surprise to her to see lots of wood, and furniture that looked very much like it came from Ikea. Simple but practical, though with surprising touches here and there. There were a few pictures on the wall, mostly photographs or prints. Rey recognized some of them as places in New Orleans.

"It looks nice, Sis," Rey said with a smile. "Have you lived here long?"

"About a year," Marie said with a smile. She headed to the kitchen, which was separated from the dining and living room by a counter that also served as a bar. "Can I get you a beer? I've got that easy to drink stuff. Amberbach."

"Sure," Rey said, then chuckled. "Remind me to take you to the Pipe & Fiddle."

Marie found a couple bottles and plucked an opener that was magnetically stuck to the side of the fridge. She opened the bottles, then handed one to Rey. "That's your pub, right?"

Rey nodded and took a drink. "They're doing pretty well. Got a four and a half stars in the newspaper last week."

"Grats," Marie offered. She led the way to the living room set so they could take a seat. "So, you had something on your mind?"

"Yeah." Rey removed the pictures of the crime scene from the large envelope and put them on the bar. "There was a murder in the subway system. Several murders in fact, and there were Qabbalistic-like symbols written all over the place, along with a circle." She paused, as she wanted to let Marie look at the pictures before she said anything else.

"Yikes," Marie remarked as she took a look. "That's a mess. But those symbols," she tapped one of the photos, "aren't anything I've seen before. I studied several different ritual systems before I settled on what I use now and I looked at some books on what they call High Magic. It's not real magic at all, by the way, and they use specific symbols tied to concepts and angels. None of these match." She stared at the photos and noticed something. "Looks like those victims were dead a quite a while."

"They were vampires," Rey replied. "Probably not very old, given the condition of their bodies. Not likely completely destroyed, either. Hopefully they won't come to in the morgue." She tapped one of the corpses in the photos. "Whoever did this has to either be a supernatural of some kind, or someone who can do a very good job faking it."

"All the vampires had to have been taken down fast and hard, and it looks like there was only one person who did the killing. There was only one blood trail leaving the scene, and it went deeper into the subway tunnels. Not a place to go wandering around, as vampires control them." Rey shook her head. "I was hoping to find out if there was something important about the location where it happened, or if it was something convenient for the murderer. Mizuko said she's seen symbols like those before, but can't remember where. I thought you might have an idea."

Marie frowned. "Sorry, sis. It sounds to me like your best bet is to find a way to jog your friend's memory somehow."

Rey nodded. "The other thing I'm worried about is the possibility of the murderer trying to implicate practitioners," she said. "Or maybe even targeting them."

Marie asked, "Were there more murders than just these two?"

Right on cue, Rey's phone rang. The caller ID reported the number belonged to a contact in the Mythic PD.

"These are interesting times, in the Chinese meaning of the words," Rey replied, then pressed a button on her phone. "Lafitte."

Her contact quickly identified himself in hushed tones. He told her that he knew Rey was interested in some weird killings that happened down in the subway. This time the pattern was similar, only it took place on the roof of Mythic Central Tower, a skyscraper 70 stories tall. Maintenance workers found the bodies and sigils marked in blood — same kind as in the subway. And the bodies were fresh. The police, of course, were already there and he advised her to stay clear as this was a police matter. But, if she happened to have some information, he knew the detective in charge would take anything he could get because this thing was starting to look like a serial killer was on the loose.

Marie watched Rey's face during the call. When Rey hung up, she asked, "What's going on?"

"The murderer has struck again," Rey frowned. "Same sigils as in the subway. Only this time the victims weren't vampires." She looked Marie in the eye. "If you know anyone who lives or works in or around Mythic Central Tower, call them and make sure they're alright."

She shook her head once, then asked, "Are you going up there?"

"Once the police have cleared out."

"Why? It's a murder. Isn't this a little morbid? I mean, shouldn't you leave this to someone else to deal with? You're a hotel and casino manager."

Rey couldn't help but chuckle. "The casino's my day job. I have to look into it, for a couple of reasons. First and foremost, I was asked to help. If it turns out to be just a run of the mill serial killer, then I'll turn over all the evidence I have to my friends on the force. If there's supernatural involvement..." She shook her head. "The police aren't equipped to deal with that kind of thing. My friends and I will do what we can to put a stop to it, just like we did with that Hunter last year."

"Geez, Rey," Marie said with a shake of her head. "Those cops aren't your responsibility. If you need more excitement in your life, you should just take up skydiving or something."

Rey couldn't keep from laughing. "Oh, the "or something" usually seems to find me." She shook her head. "This is just something I have to do. Part of my job as the Witch of the Bitter Wind." A bit of an exaggeration, perhaps, but if it might be a supernatural threat that could affect Changelings, then she had to be ready to deal with it.

Marie gave Rey a sour look. "Well, you aren't going to do this alone are you?"

"No, of course not. At the very least, I'll have Mizuko with me. Maybe when she sees these new symbols it might help her remember more about them."

Marie nodded. She knew that Mizuko was a changeling. Maybe that was backup enough, though she still wasn't completely happy with Rey sticking her neck out like this.

She decided to change the focus of the discussion. "Sometimes it helps when trying to remember things to

retrace your steps. If she's seen this before, then try to get her to place she's most likely to have seen them. Where does she usually deal with things that deal with magic or arcane writing?"

"Wherever she happens to be at the time, for the most part," Rey replied, "but I do know where she goes to work on stuff once in a while." She wasn't about to mention the Hollow, but she knew that's where Mizuko did her "testing" on tokens to figure out what they did.

"Maybe taking her there will help, then."

"Hopefully." Rey glanced at her watch. "I need to call Mizuko and Less and let them know what's happened. Want to meet me for lunch next week?"

"Yes, sure!" Marie responded. They agreed on a time and place, then Rey placed the call.

—

Mizuko was leaning on the desk staring at the computer screen while using the mouse to surf for Ishtar websites. He was watching her progress and reading over her shoulder. "I'm not sure that Ishtar/Ereshkigal slash fic is all that useful to our investigation," said Less. He had learned a fair amount about the internet in the last couple of hours.

Mizuko had as well. While she'd used a computer once before to look up newspaper articles, she was in general unfamiliar with the devices. But she took Less's guidance well and clicked where he told her. "*Maybe not. I guess her people are keeping their experience with Ishtar private.*"

Less' phone rang, and glance at the display revealed it was Rey.

"It's Rey," he said as he accepted the call.

"The murderer has struck again," she said without preamble, as if channeling Mizuko. "Top of the Mythic Central Tower. The police are there right now, but I think we should try and check it out as soon as they're gone."

"Oh boy," said Less as a shiver went down his spine. "We're at my place. Can you swing by to get us when you're ready to go?"

"I'm heading in your direction in a couple of minutes. May I talk to Mizuko for a second?"

"Sure, hang on." Less handed Mizuko the phone.

"Hello, Rey," Mizuko said into the phone.

"Hi, Mizuko. Do you have a phone number or something where I could get in contact with or a message to the Spring Queen?"

"Yes. *An answering service.*" Mizuko gave her the number.

"I appreciate this," Rey replied. "I'll see you and Less in a bit."

"Okay." Mizuko hung up, then told Less she was coming to pick them up.

Rey quickly dialed the number Mizuko had given her. "This is Rey Lafitte," she said in her message, her tone as polite and respectful as she could make it. "I need to speak with you as soon as possible about a mutual acquaintance from Eldon Well, Vermont."

Rey received a call back when she was about halfway to Less's apartment building, which was ten minutes away. The caller info was "unavailable" but when Rey answered she recognized Ishtar's voice.

"You wanted to talk about someone from your old home right away," Ishtar said. "I'm currently out with a friend. How important is this?" She didn't sound curt or hurried, however. Wherever she was, Rey just barely hear a quiet hum through the phone over the sound of her driving. She thought Ishtar might be in a car as well.

"Very, I'm afraid," Rey replied. "I'm hoping to prevent Lyla from starting the war." She didn't know who was with Ishtar, but hoped her giving the Emerald Queen Lyla's name wouldn't be a problem.

There was silence on the other end for a long moment. When Ishtar spoke again, she said, "I think it would serve you better to understand who your friends are, Rey Lafitte. I did what I did to protect you and the rest of our people. But. Things have changed since then. I will not drag the Duchy into another war with a Fae Lord, but I will tell you this. I will not declare war on her people, but if I find her in my city, I will destroy her myself regardless of our friendly past. Tell her that. And watch your own back. If someone other than me realizes what she is, you could be implicated as a Loyalist. Are you hearing what I'm saying?"

"I know *exactly* what you saw in her," Rey replied. "And I know the position I am in. Perhaps I am naive to think her decisions might have resulted in her fate being rewoven. What I do know is that if she feels she and those she are responsible for are threatened, she will do whatever it takes to remove that threat." Her words were calm, and carried no threats. She was just stating a fact, and voicing her own concerns. The vision she'd had was of Ramiel and Lyla side by side, as Gentry. But Lyla and Ramiel were no longer together, and she seemed much.. calmer. More in control of herself. Rey's biggest worry was that if Lyla was confronted by Ishtar, that could very well be the trigger to fully "awaken" what was dormant in her friend. "I will tell her what you said when I speak to her again."

Ishtar's voice softened. "Believe me, I wish it didn't have to be this way, but I'm a queen and my duty is to protect you. I hope that she never accepts what fate has in store for her. But I can't count on that, not when everyone's lives could be on the line. I admire her as a person, but she is unbelievably dangerous, especially with her... her brother. I don't want to hurt anyone, ever. It's not my nature to do harm. But if I encounter her here I have to take action. I may be the only one in the Duchy that can."

"I understand, and I appreciate your briefly interrupting you evening to talk to me," Rey said.

"Good night, Ms. Lafitte."

Rey spent the remainder of the drive to Less' building thinking about what Ishtar had said. If someone else discovered Lyla's potential... Rey didn't want to think about the fallout. She sighed, and dialed Lyla's number. After several rings, it went to voicemail.

"Lyla, it's Rey. I spoke with the queen, and I have a message for you from her. Not the kind of thing I want to leave in a message. I'll call back later." Rey tucked her phone in her purse and went inside to meet up with Less and Mizuko.

They'd had plenty of time to come down to the lobby to meet Rey, and that's where she found them. Mizuko was looking somber. "Less, Rey. I have a bad feeling about this one. I don't think we should go. I think we should forget about all this."

Mizuko had been silent as they waited for Rey to arrive. Less had detected her posture had changed since the call from Rey. Something had been bothering her ever since then.

"Are you sure?" Rey said. "What about it is bothering you?" She knew that Mizuko's "feelings" about stuff like

this were usually on the mark, but she wanted to know if Mizuko knew why they shouldn't go.

"I feel like I'm going to see something I do not want to see. Something horrible."

"Connected with the writing, maybe?" Rey asked. If Mizuko's intuition had somehow been triggered by the knowledge of a second set of symbols at the other murder site, maybe she might remember more about them.

Mizuko signed, "I don't know."

Less folded himself into the back seat and tucked his umbrella between his legs. "Have you ever been to the Central Tower before, Mizuko?" he asked.

She followed reluctantly into the car, taking the front seat. She left the seat belt off so she could turn to look at Less. She shook her head no.

"Do you know anyone who lives or works in the Central Tower?" he prodded.

She shook her head again.

"Maybe it's not about the victims," Rey considered. "But the killer."

Mizuko turned back around in her seat. The troubled look on her face revealed her uncertainty. Resigned to finding out whether she liked it or not, she reached for the seat belt and buckled in.

When Rey pulled into the parking ramp beneath MC Central Tower, there was already a media circus underway. Once they'd left the car and made their way to the entrance of the building, two bodies on gurneys were being wheeled toward a waiting ambulance. Because of the wind at the top of the tower, they'd had trouble with body bags, and so they'd had to make do with the sheets until they could get them into the ambulance. The police were keeping people back while the bodies were transported, but a stray gust caught the corner of a sheet and flipped it back, revealing the face of one of the deceased.

Misfortune chanced that the corpse's face was aimed directly toward Less, Rey and Mizuko. Her blank, dead eyes were still frozen in terror and her face contorted in agony. The dusky-black color of her skin, her full, expressive lips and her cheekbones were both beautiful and strange.

Mizuko made a strangled sound. "*Ebony. Rose.*"

Rey's face hardened. After everything that had happened, this was the last thing they needed. There was no question about it now. The killer had to be stopped. She put a hand on Mizuko's shoulder, offering silent comfort and support.

Less shook his head and clenched his fists. "Who is doing this?" he asked the universe. "Mizuko, I am so sorry."

Rey scanned the the officers working the scene, hoping to see one of her contacts. Obviously they wouldn't be able to talk right now, but being able to touch base, even if only with a slight nod, needed to be done. She didn't see one, but she did notice they had an opening to move behind police line and into the building while everyone's attention was on the bodies.

Mizuko clutched Less's sleeve and murmured, "*Who is the second victim?*" She seemed afraid to try to sneak

over and look herself. And of course she didn't know that Less could become invisible if he wanted and do so easily; her question was meant to be rhetorical.

"If we move right now," Rey said softly in Glymjack Cant, "we can get past the police line and into the building without being spotted."

"I'm going to take a look at the victims," said Less hurriedly to Rey and Mizuko. "I'll meet you on the roof shortly." He strode out the lobby doors and slipped between the parked cars on the street. As he did so, he gathered the contract of Smoke around him and vanished from sight. Once invisible, he jogged lightly to the ambulance to watch when the sheets were removed.

"Let's go," Rey whispered to Mizuko and guided her friend through the gap in security and into the building.

Mizuko followed her inside. They made their way to elevators and rode one to the top of the building. From there, it was a matter of finding stairs to the roof. It wasn't hard to find them since someone had propped a door open to allow the gurneys to pass and they hadn't been closed yet. When they opened the door at the top of the stairs, they were assaulted by a strong wind that pushed them back. They had to brace themselves, then venture out onto the roof and under the cold Winter sky.

The area had already been abandoned. Lights for aircraft slowly faded out and then back on and it was under this changing light that Rey and Mizuko had to glimpse the scene. Blood was everywhere, as if there had been a fierce struggle. Someone had marked where the bodies were found near each other in the center of what looking like a large triangle traced in blood. Strange, twisting symbols of a style similar to those found in the subway lined the marking.

"*Triangle*," Mizuko intoned suddenly. "*Air. Fairie. Circle. Earth. Vampire. There is a pattern here, Rey.*"

"Oh no," Rey whispered. "He's working his way through the elements. If this is some kind of ritual, and the victims are sacrifices..." She couldn't bring herself to finish the sentence. Whatever the murderer was planning - and if he really was calling down magic - whatever he was trying to accomplish was going to be big. Very big. "Earth for vampires, who were found underground. Triangle for Air, for the fae and we're at the highest point in Mythic City. That leaves fire and water, if he's sticking to the standard four elements. And if he's tying supernaturals to elements, that could mean witches and werewolves are left. But which would werewolves be? Water, because of their changing forms, or fire, because their emotions run so hot and wild?"

Rey shook her head. "But we don't have time. We need to figure out where he's going to strike next. The cycle is Earth, Air, Fire, Water, right? What place in Mythic would best represent Fire?"

Meanwhile, at street level, the paramedics had parked the gurneys behind the ambulance. The street had been blocked off by the police so there was no traffic as Less approached. The paramedics were unpacking a pair of body bags to replace the sheets.

"Get a big one," called the guy who was unrolling the sheet from Ebony Rose's body. "The one with the hook is a bruiser."

Less froze and his viscerals tightened. He couldn't wait for the paramedic to get organized and knelt by the bloodied sheet. He took a deep breath and held it, then tugged at the corner of the sheet to peel it away from the head. Edgar's ogreish face stared blankly up at him.

Shocked and numbed at the same time, Less stood and staggered back, making way for the paramedic. The two of them finished with Ebony, zipping her away and stowing her in the back of the vehicle. Less watched, stricken and fixated, as they unwrapped Edgar's mutilated body and slid him into the black plastic. Edgar, who had always worked hard at dispelling the ogre stereotype. Edgar, who had been one of the keenest of

the Winter courtiers, wanting to help where he could in the running of the Duchy. Edgar, whose loneliness had brought him to Less - and Winter - some eight years ago, had finally found some happiness in Ebony's companionship. They hadn't been dating long, as far as Less knew. A few months, maybe. Could this have been their six month anniversary? A date atop the highest point in Mythic to look down over the lights of practically the entire state.

The paramedics had finished loading the bodies and slammed the doors fast behind. The driver peeled off his latex gloves with a snap and tossed them carelessly onto the pile of bloodied sheets left in the street. The police were responsible for the scene and would have to deal with the mess. Almost without thinking, Less stepped forward and collected the discarded gloves. As he slowly walked back to the tower's lobby, avoiding the hurrying police who couldn't see him, he inverted the inside-out gloves and tucked them neatly into his pocket. Mortal possessions such as these came in useful when invoking certain Faerie Contracts.

As he rode the elevator to the top floor, he stared at the changing floor numbers without seeing them. He was seeing only the scene of the two lovers, bloodied and lifeless. *Who was doing this?* he asked himself again. *First, vampires in the subway. Now, changelings on the rooftop. The lowest point and the highest point in Mythic. Was the killer asserting his or her dominance over his territory, marking the boundaries?* These were the first deaths in the Duchy while he was King. He was responsible for them. He had to stop it.

The shifting gravity of the elevator slowing quickly to a stop brought Less back to the here and now. He found the floor deserted and returned to visibility as he mounted the steps to the roof door. He automatically put his hand to his cap as he stepped out onto the windy roof to join Rey and Mizuko at the horrible crime scene.

"What about fire?" he asked as he walked up. It was hard to hear in the blowing wind.

Rey turned her head to look at Less, and resorted to their motley's sign language. "The murderer is following a ritual, whether real or imagined, using the elements. Vampires and Earth, Changelings and Air. That leaves Fire and Water. If he's going in order, that means Fire is next."

Less nodded. His brain was still reeling from shock and the facts felt slippery in his head. "I thought maybe the killer was marking out a territory. Lowest point to highest point, but magical elements makes a lot of sense. Fire. Bakery? Something to do with the sun? Tanning parlour? Hot springs? No, more a water thing..." He paused, looking around the wind-blasted crime scene. The red illumination made it all very surreal. "Edgar's dead, too. Winter court. Seems unlikely that the killer just happened to find them up here. Anything that suggests they were lured here?"

"Not at first glance," Rey replied. "Mizuko, now that you can see this set of symbols, does it help you remember where you saw them before?"

Mizuko had put an arm around Less and gave him a supportive squeeze (being careful of his eyes, of course), but at Rey's prompting, she looked around at the lazy scrawl of symbols. This time, she didn't want to touch them or get near them. She knew that a lot of this was Rose's and the thought made her look and feel ill. The wind and the height wasn't helping.

While Mizuko studied the symbols, Less prowled around the edges of the roof. The police had already secured the scene and the killer probably left by the access door but he made himself feel useful by looking for trails of blood or other clues. "We should get to Ebony and Edgar's places," he shouted to Rey over the wind. "We might get there before the police."

"Why?" she signed back.

Less switched to sign. Rey was demonstrating the advantages of the non-verbal communication. "There might be some clue to how and why they came to be in such an odd place. It's possible they just snuck up here for

a romantic date, but if this is a magical ritual I doubt the killer would have left their presence here to chance. There seems to have been a struggle so they weren't brought here by force or after they were dead." Less shrugged. Until they figured out where the 'Fire' ritual would happen - and soon, the pattern suggested it would happen in 24 hours - there wasn't much else to go on. "Unless you know of some kind of fiery supernatural group we can warn."

Rey gave him a look. "Witches and werewolves," she signed. "I don't think it matters how they got up here. We need to stop the ritual. I can call my sister and warn her, but as for werewolves, that's a problem. The only ones I have contact with are in Santa Fe. I don't have any relationship with ones here in Mythic." She thought for a moment. That wasn't completely true, though. She did know one werewolf who lived in Mythic, or at least he used to.

"That's something, at least," signed Less. He went back to hunting for evidence the police might have missed until Mizuko was finished studying the symbols. He opened up his senses for the presence of gates to the Hedge, just in case. He didn't sense the presence of a Gate here and while there was no obvious evidence left behind that he noticed, the lack of a Gate told him that it was probable that both the victims and their attacker probably came up using elevator and stairs and therefore might have been captured on security video feeds.

Mizuko was waving her hands, trying to get his attention as well as Rey's. When they turned toward her, she signed in Glymjack. "I remember now. I never saw this writing in books or in ancient manuscripts. The only place I could have seen it then is in my role as a sorceress. I saw it on a Token that had been found in the Hedge, one I was contracted to identify. I did so, but as part of the agreement I promised to forget to whom the item belonged. In exchange I was given a fancy sports car."

Mizuko spoke aloud, but all Rey and Less could hear was "know" and "did this". A gust of wind swept up and Mizuko, already pale, upset at the loss of another friend, and overwhelmed, teetered toward the edge of the building. But for the high railing that she roughly banged into, she would have fallen off.

Rey signaled to the others they ought to go inside, where it was safer - and more comfortable.

Less reluctantly agreed. He found the tower top invigorating to the core of his being. He took Mizuko's arm and wrapped it around himself to assist her inside. A knot tightened nauseatingly in his stomach. He held the girl by the upper arms and looked directly into her eyes. "Mizuko, I remember you saying you had been given a car as payment by the Dusk Court. Is that the token you mean?"

"I can't remember that. But what and who don't matter. You'll understand when we get inside and I can tell you more."

(resp from Less?)

Once in the stairwell, Mizuko let go of Less so she could use Glymjack sign. She didn't need anyone overhearing or understanding their conversation.

"I saw symbols like those on a Token found in the Hedge that I'd been given to study," Mizuko signed. "It was a very specific Token called the Keeper's Quirt. The symbols were etched into the grip. I remember the Token because it was so dangerous to the user — it was designed by a Keeper as a device for discipline and punishment. But that isn't important. It's the symbols that betray who it is we are after." She looked at each of them intently, her eyes wide and scared. Mizuko was saying that the person committing these murders was a Keeper.

A shiver of fear crawled up and down Rey's spine. "How do we stop him?" Of course, she knew they'd find a way. They had to. A Keeper in the Duchy, regardless of what it was doing, was Very Bad News.

Less took a step back as if he had been slapped in the face. He signed in ragged, jerky motions, "Mizuko, you were given a Porche by Richard and Claire for identifying two Tokens. One was the phony Glacial Axe and the other must have been the Quirt! Does this Keeper want it back?" He pulled out his phone to dial Claire. His shaking fingers caused him to start over twice.

Mizuko winced and covered her ears, mouthing, "not supposed to remember that".

But Less's call went through. Claire answered in her calm, raspy voice. "Yes, my King?"

"Stop trying to make her remember, Less." Rey's voice was almost a hiss. "If she does, she could end up breaking a pledge."

Less wanted answers immediately but he couldn't talk about this over the phone, "Dub-, uh, Claire! I must see you immediately. Meet me at the train station as soon as you can."

He dropped his phone into his pocket and nearly jogged to the door to the roof. He called back over his shoulder, "Try to get a look at the security tapes!" He burst back out onto the wind-swept rooftop, briefly got his bearings, then opened his umbrella over his head. The wind snapped the umbrella backwards and yanked Less quickly off his feet. He zipped across the roof, over the rail, and disappeared into the night.

Rey let out a heavy sigh, then turned to look at Mizuko. "I don't think it's a good idea to try and see the tapes right now, not with all the police," she signed. "Figuring out where the Keeper is going to strike again is more important. Fire's got to be next. We need a map of Mythic so we can find where the best representation of Fire might be."

"We have a really good view of the whole city if we go back out on top and look over the edge," Mizuko signed.

"No thanks," Rey replied with a negative motion of her hands. "I've got no desire to get blown over the edge."

Mizuko nodded, then turned and climbed back up the stairs and out to the roof.

"Mizuko!" Rey called out and took a step to follow her friend. "What are you going to look for? A building engulfed in flames or something? How can you tell without a map what's what from this height?"

With the wind whipping her hair and filling her ears, the nymph hadn't heard. She disappeared beyond view of the stairwell.

Rey bit back a growl and walked back out onto the roof. She wanted nothing more than to take a two by four to the back of her friend's head to knock some sense into her.

Mizuko must have moved pretty fast crossing the roof, because when Rey spotted her the nymph was already at the edge, chest-high railing clutched in her hands. She'd poked her head between the rails and was looking down. She was still looking down for a minute after Rey joined her. Far below, they could still see emergency vehicles and police cars in front of the building. They looked so tiny and the ground so far away, it made one's head spin. One blocky vehicle with unlit lights pulled slowed away. It was the ambulance bearing the bodies of the two murdered changelings.

Rey felt Mizuko touch her arm and glanced at her friend. Mizuko signed, "It always seems strange to me that whenever there is an emergency reported, they show up. Even when it's not the kind of emergency they are known for, they are here ready to help because they have the emergency training that can help in almost any situation. This time, though, there wasn't anything they could do. They only came because someone called 911 and they have to come when that happens. This time, all they got for their effort was the horror of

witnessing the result of murders. They have to live with that. They suffer just because they want to help."

"Who are you talking about, Mizuko?" Rey asked.

"The firemen," she replied. Mizuko pointed down to the white emergency truck with red lights far below.

"Is that all you wanted to do?" Rey asked angrily. "Look down at the fire trucks? We could have done that on the ground."

Mizuko looked back at Rey passively. "Being angry with me does not help, Rey. We know now we are looking for a Keeper. Do you really think he goes to the library and checks out maps of the city? Or anything humanlike at all? Or do you think he looks at the environment around him and uses what he sees? If you want to stop him, you're going to have to start thinking like him. And stop getting angry at every little thing."

"At least I can control my temper," Rey ground out, "unlike you, who all a guy has to do is give you a whiff of sex and you're ready to spread your legs for him. And I wanted the map so that when we come up with ideas on where he might strike next, we know where the hell we need to go."

Mizuko continued to look at Rey calmly. "First of all, you've slept around more than I have. Second, is lashing out at me again what you call control?"

"Yes, considering the alternative." Rey made a conscious effort to relax, to unclench her fists and retract the wicked thorn-like claws that had sprouted from her fingertips. Her brambles and thorns shifted in agitation as she turned her mind toward trying to figure out where the Keeper might strike next. What would he consider a representation of Fire?

Rey sighed, finally letting go of the anger that had gripped her. "We still need to find a map," she signed to her friend. "Fire stations are one possibility, but a map might point out others that would fit into the Keeper's symbolism of fire. I don't have the city memorized yet." She tried not to think about Water, because the first place that sprang to mind was the casino - things were constantly changing there, for both good and ill.

Mizuko turned her face to gaze out over the nighttime landscape speckled with street lamps, headlights, and lit windows while the harsh wind chilled them. She turned around and leaned with her back upon the railing. "Go ahead," she signed. "If I go that way, I'll draw attention and no one will forget I was here. I'll meet you at the car."

Rey bit back a self-deprecating laugh. Mizuko's comment about being remembered - or rather the implication that Rey wouldn't be - wasn't meant as an insult. Her friend's looks guaranteed people would remember her, and they both knew that wasn't always a good thing. And, should someone see and stop her, Rey had a better chance of talking her way out of the situation. Maybe. "See you there," she signed, and walked back into the building.

Twenty minutes later, Mizuko joined Rey at her car. She knocked on the window and after Rey unlocked it, she opened the passenger side door and sat down next to Rey.

"What took you so long?" Rey asked, curious as to what had delayed her friend.

"It's a long way down," Mizuko stated in sign. "I jumped but chickened out half way down. The ground comes up so fast when you are falling," she added with a wistful look on her face. "So I had to fly the rest of the way and that is not fast."

"You jumped?" The Fairest stared at her friend. "Why did you do that?"

Mizuko looked vaguely surprised. "It was the fastest way I could think of to get down."

"So the fact you could have gone splat on the pavement and died never crossed your mind? Mizuko, you're not invulnerable!"

Mizuko looked somber. "You are right. It was a little scary and I won't do it a second time. But this Keeper, it scares me a lot."

"You're not the only one," Rey replied as she turned the key in the ignition. "I wish Less hadn't just taken off like that, or at least told us what he was up to." She drove the car out of the parking spot and onto the street. "I saw a gas station a couple blocks away. We'll pick up a map of Mythic and then head to my place, I think. We can work there for now." She glanced at Mizuko for a moment before returning her eyes to the road. "Unless you've got a feeling we should go somewhere else?" Rey never knew when or where Mizuko would get her prophetic hunches, but they'd all learned to listen to them.

Mizuko shook her head. The she hesitantly added, "But... I could look at your future if you want."

"Not if it means using that Goblin Contract," Rey replied. "We've got no chance of stopping the Keeper if you're not with us."

Mizuko's face turned curious. She studied Rey's face to see if she meant that but couldn't tell for sure. "No, not that one. This is something else. I've learned to open my mind to sense another person's fate. Well, only a little bit. I can't ask questions and I have no control over what I find. I only get the most important thing in the near future. Like maybe within the next six months or so. I haven't mentioned this to anyone and would like it to be a secret. I don't want to be constantly bothered by people who want me to tell them the future all the time."

"Why are you offering this now?" Rey asked with a pained smile. "To give me hope that we'll get through this alive?" She wasn't turning down the offer, not yet.

"Just a chance of hope," Mizuko clarified. "And the future can change, sometimes. I think. That's what they say on TV. I figure if I look and tell you if I see one, then you know you might survive this thing. If I don't see one, then I can let you know you are going to die if you continue this investigation. Or I could look and not tell you if you'd rather."

"I think we could use all the hope we can get. What glimpse can you get of my future?"

Mizuko gazed at Rey and for a creepy moment, her irises drained of all color, leaving her eyes to appear white. Mizuko blinked and looked quickly away.

"What did you see?"

She didn't look at Rey, keeping her face toward her window. *"It's dark and you are under water. There is a lot of blood. Your eyes are staring and empty."*

"And here I was thinking you might see Richard getting a week's vacation and we spend it at my place," Rey joked lightly, but her thoughts were anything but. She knew trying to know the future was tempting Fate, pun intended. If it was a portent of her death, she wasn't going to turn her back on it. Not that she wanted to die, but what Mizuko saw didn't necessarily mean death, but if that was what was going to happen, then she'd damn well make sure it meant something.

Mizuko didn't turn her face back toward Rey, hiding her tears by staring hopelessly out across the street.

"Miz," Rey said softly. "It's a potential future, not my fate carved in stone. Things can change."

"*I hope you are right,*" Mizuko murmured.

—

Less tried to judge when he'd hit the ground wobbling back and forth as he was under his umbrella. His legs flailed about individually, trying to damp out the oscillations. One foot touched down and he pivoted quickly to the ground. He rolled ungracefully to a stop and stood painfully. He brushed off his knees and elbow, noting the damage done to his clothes. His arm ached from hanging from his umbrella. He'd lost his hat somewhere over Central Mythic and his hair would defeat any comb. Still, it had been worth the ride and adrenaline pumped through his veins. Unable to rid himself of a big smile, he limped to the usual place near the train station where he usually met with his agents.

Claire must have left wherever she had been about the same time Less had to meet him because she showed up shortly after he had arrived. At this time, she must have reinforced her Mask because her fae mein wasn't showing. Instead she appeared as an ordinary young woman. With her hood down, he could see she wore her pale blonde hair cut short. Her normally yellow, slitted eyes were simply a pale grey. She still carried a sense of presence, a magnetism when she entered a room.

"Is there an emergency, sire?" she asked.

Less' eyes were drawn to her hair. Now that he knew that her face carried reptilian features, her hair looked oddly out of place even on her mask. He tried to compose himself but rubbed his bruised elbow. "Yes, I have intelligence regarding a new threat from the Hedge." As the Wretched Doorward this fell into her domain of influence in the Wardens of the Bleak Seal. "But tell me this first: where is the Quirt?"

Claire was quiet a moment before she said, "It was safe but now it sounds to me like someone has broken her promise."

"I'm not sure what you're talking about," said Less coolly. "There is a Keeper in town looking for It's property."

The Draconic changeling looked puzzled. "I don't understand. Why would you think that?"

"Come with me," said Less. He led her into the darkened train station and unlocked his office. It was pitch black inside and he turned on the small desk lamp to sort through his files. He pulled out the photographs of the subway ritual murder. "Do you recognize the style of the symbols written in blood? This was last night. I just returned from a second."

Claire studied them a long moment, then nodded. "They appear to be Linear-A script, written in blood. The same kind of script was imprinted on token, the Quirt you mentioned.

"I personally believe that some Fae Lords took to using that script for their own because it is obscure and has never been translated by modern man. Yet of course, they can know what it means. Thus, they have their own language that we cannot understand but that they never made up for themselves."

"Linear-A? Well, that leaves the possibility that it isn't a Keeper and just a coincidence. However, since you and Richard hold the tokens with the matching script, you may be in grave danger. Edgar and Ebony Rose are already dead. Keep me informed on what you are doing to protect yourselves. I need to follow up on some things to try to prevent the culmination of this ritual." Less was still high on adrenaline and was operating a mile a minute. He dug out his phone again and speed-dialled Septimus, letting it ring until it got the Warden out of bed.

"Septimus, I have a riddle for you. If vampires are earth, and changelings are air. What are werewolves?"

There was a pause, then Septimus said, "Ah, very tricky of you, my liege! Testing my intellect by waking me from a sound slumber and asking a riddle. I hope I shall not disappoint." He made a thoughtful sound as he worked out the problem. "Sounds to me as if you are talking about the elements. Traditionally, there are four: earth, air, fire and water. Some might add in spirit or metal. Perhaps wood or something to represent the living world symbolically. You ask, what are werewolves, and these appear to be my choices. Hmmm..."

"Legend has it they are cursed, and when changed they are creatures of rage. But that very assumption places change ahead of rage, does it not? I might have chosen Fire for their rage, but that's not their primary feature in my opinion. What makes a werewolf a werewolf is not their anger, but their ability to change their form. You said 'if vampires are earth'. Fascinating. Perhaps they are like the earth for to us the earth changes very little over time. A vampire is locked into who they were at the time of their death, changing only a little at a time. Changelings are fae creatures, as well as human. Some moreso than others. If fae are like air, then surely it refers to the capricious natures of our faerie kin.

"If the feature that best represents werewolves is the ability to change, then we must look at our choice. Does spirit change? No. Metal? Perhaps, but not easily. Wood? slowly unless acted upon by an outside force. Fire inspires change very quickly, but only once. Now water, though... that changes quite often and frequently. Rain and mist, snow and ice, even steam. It can change seasonally, or it can appear in several forms in a single storm, and it can change often.

"That is my answer then. If vampires are earth and changelings air, then werewolves are water."

"And so witches are fire," said Less, mostly to himself. "Well done, Septimus. Those vampires you found in the subway were part of a ritual. Tonight Edgar and Ebony Rose were killed in the same manner. We assume fire is next so witches are going to die tomorrow night in a place representing fire unless we can stop it. And Septimus - this is likely the work of a Keeper." Less was ushering Claire out of his office and was fumbling with his keys to lock up. He wanted to hurry over to Edgar's place to see if he could find any clues there - and to break the bad news to his friends.

Septimus' reaction to the news of Edgar was decidedly remorseful.

Claire said, "If there is a Keeper involved, I presume we need to verify his whereabouts and then take some kind of action. Perhaps Autumn may be of some use should there be negotiations."

Less nodded. "I'll be meeting up with the Bitter Witch to compare notes after I hit Edgar's. What do you want to tell me regarding the Tokens?"

Claire stifled a chuckle at the mangling of the Witch of the Bitter Wind's title to answer his question. "Only that the Quirt was found to be too dangerous to allow it to fall into the hands of anyone who might use it and that I took great pains to ensure it would be forgotten and its location secured. Sire, I cannot believe this Keeper is specifically after this thing. I found it discarded beside one of the main trods near Las Vegas. After the sorceress told me its properties, it was clear to me why it would be discarded by a smart changeling, or purposely left by a Keeper to corrupt changelings. Either way, it's too dangerous to allow it to be used."

"Then it should be destroyed. Just make sure no one is in the way if a Keeper goes barging in."

Less rushed to Edgar's place. He couldn't afford to slow down or fatigue would overwhelm him. On the way he called Rey, "Rey, I think witches are fire. Werewolves are water due to their fluid shape. I'm going to check at Edgar's place for anything useful. Where are you now?"

—

The lights were on in Rey's kitchen, where she had spread out the map of Mythic on the table. With a marker, she circled the murder sites and was looking for where the nearest fire stations were. The two sites were within blocks of each other, and it only took a moment to look up the location of the nearest firehouse — only a few blocks from the tower.

Rey tapped a finger on the map. "I think our best chance is there," she said. "Do you know if there's a trod or some other entry into the Hedge near the tower?"

Mizuko shook her head, then studied the map's index. Finding the address she was looking for, she traced the map grid with her finger until she stopped at a location about four blocks north of the firestation. She tapped it and said. "*So that's where Blood Tears is*".

"Oh shoot." Rey breathed sharply out her nose. That place was Witch Central - at least for those who followed Ishtar. "It wouldn't be difficult at all to snatch a witch or two, they're so close."

Mizuko nodded and waited grimly.

Rey's phone rang and she glanced at the display. "It's Less," she said as she answered it. After listening for a moment, she spoke. "I figured the witches would be fire. Mizuko and I are at my place. We think the next site will be the firestation near the tower. And a place where witches hang out is four blocks from there."

"Okay, I'll meet you at your place after I'm done at Edgar's," said Less breathlessly as he jogged down the street. "We should inform the Crowns. Can you fill Veridia in on the ritual? Have Mizuko leave a message for Ishtar. I'll let Summer know. See you soon."

"What do you hope to find at Edgar's?" Rey asked.

"Some evidence as to how he was lured to the roof of the tower," responded Less.

"Are you sure you want to spend time doing that?" Rey asked. "Is it really that important how the Keeper got his victims?"

"It might help us identify the Keeper at the club before the abduction. If your guess of the fire station is wrong, and we just wait for them to show up..." He left the conclusion unsaid.

"A couple of problems with going to the club to look for the Keeper," Rey replied quickly. "First, getting in - you've got to be a member, or have a member vouch for you as a guest. Second, this is a sex club. They are having sex everywhere - on the dance floor, on the stairs, on any available piece of furniture. Do you really want to be wandering around in there, looking at everyone? And third, it's a Keeper. For all we know, all he has to do is snap his fingers and they'll pop up wherever it is he wants to murder them."

Mizuko tugged on Rey's sleeve to get her attention. "You only need to watch the witches," she signed.

"Mizuko just said we'll only need to watch the witches, and she's right. But that still means we have to get into the club."

Less didn't want to get into an explanation that he was already involved in the membership process in order to spy on the witches. "I guess we can't get memberships by tonight? Is your sister a member? If I had an example I could make some membership forgeries. Or if you knew the type of re-entry stamp they were using, we could Skinmask it."

"I don't know if they have re-entry stamps, and I'm pretty sure they do background checks on all potential

members. You also have to provide a report from a doctor or lab showing you don't have any VD's or HIV." Rey didn't go and list the rest of the requirements. "The only way to get you or Mizuko in would be to be vouched for by a member in good standing. Or find some way to sneak you two in." She wasn't about to ask Marie for her membership card - what would she tell her sister about why she wanted it?

"Sneaking in wouldn't be hard. Not getting kicked out would be the challenge. Do we know any members in good standing? Getting vouched for or disguising ourselves like them would be good options."

"The only one I know well enough to ask would be my sister," Rey replied, "but looking like another member won't help if without a membership card. You know, once you're in, they might not check for membership cards. All you might need to do is get inside." Rey had a plan for getting herself in, though it would require a very brief trip to the Hollow.

"Have you seen a membership card? If you can sketch one I could probably make a passable one. But if it's just a matter of getting past a mortal bouncer, it shouldn't be too troublesome."

"Sorry, I haven't seen one. Listen, do you know what time the first murders happened? I'm thinking that if I know that, it'll give us a place to start to try and figure out when the Keeper might try again."

"Sometime between noon and three."

"Okay. I got a call from my MCPD contact just after 10 pm, so Ebony Rose and Edgar were obviously killed sometime before that. Probably not before 9 pm, given how quickly the wind might have dried the blood, and the length of time it would have taken for the police to have worked the scene." Rey nodded to herself. "I can get more info about both cases if I've got something I can give my contact, so he could get access to the files. Find out when the cops were called, and maybe we can figure out when the Keeper might strike again."

"Good idea," said Less. He had been assuming that it would happen that night. "Maybe the times also relate to the elements somehow." He wasn't familiar enough with the occult to make any connections himself, but maybe Rey could.

"Possibly," Rey agreed. "I'll deal with that as soon as I get the message to Veridia."

Rey put her phone down on the table and looked at Mizuko. "I'll be back in a minute." She grabbed a large pair of scissors from a kitchen drawer and carried it with her as she walked through the Door into the motley's hollow. She hated the thought of what she was about to do. Of how disappointed Richard might be. The Fairest took a deep breath, then straightened her shoulders. She reached up and gathered her hair into a large ponytail and pulled it over her left shoulder while holding the scissors in her right hand. "I entreat Vanity to hear my words," she murmured. "Honor the ancient Contracts and grant me the ability to deceive and pander to the vanity of others in return for my sacrifice." Rey carefully put the scissors to her hair just above where she was holding it and cut until the two foot long hank of hair dangled free. Her shorn locks swished back to fall around her shoulders, the uneven ends splaying this way and that.

The hair in Rey's hand shifted as if being blown by an unseen breeze before disintegrating into tiny motes of light that danced around her, then scattered over her skin like so much glitter. As she watched, the sparkles sank into her flesh then disappeared.

Mizuko stared at Rey's shorn hair while she put away her phone.

"What?" Rey returned the scissors to the drawer and retrieved her own phone.

Mizuko eyed her critically. *"What do you mean, what. You are the one who suddenly cut her hair off — unevenly, by the way."*

"It seemed like an appropriate sacrifice to gain Vainglory." Rey gestured with her head. "Did you speak with Ishtar, or did you just leave a message?"

Mizuko made a thoughtful sound, then switched to sign. "I left a message. I don't have a direct line to the Queen of Spring. Only her answering service."

"She's not going to be happy when she learns her witches are in danger," Rey commented as she entered a phone number into her phone. "I'm calling Richard and ask him to pass a message along to Veridia, and then I need to call my police contacts back and see about getting access to whatever they have so far on the murders. Then, we see what we can do about getting into the club."

Mizuko's phone rang and she picked it up. *"Oops,"* she said as she accidentally pressed on of the buttons along the side. The phone immediately stopped ringing. She shrugged and put it away again.

"You better see who called," Rey said.

Mizuko simply held up her phone to show the dead screen. There was no way to see who it was that way.

"Still have that messed up phone, huh." Rey shook her head. "Can you access your voicemail? Whoever called might leave a message." She hoped it wasn't Ishtar returning Mizuko's call. That would be bad.

Mizuko frowned and looked at the phone. She shrugged helplessly and shook her head.

"It should be okay," she assured Rey. *"I told her that two witches, possibly ones under her protection, were going to be murdered by a Keeper by morning. I'm sure she'll take steps to protect them."*

"And how is that going to make things okay?" Rey asked, wondering yet again what went through Mizuko's head when she did things like that. "What do you think that kind of message is going make her think, and how she'll react? How that will reflect on the Winter King's ability to do his job during his reign?"

"I believe she will take every step she can think of to keep her people safe. Without knowing any more about who is behind it, she will be out of our way while she is checking on her people," Mizuko replied. "She will have questions, of course, but we do not have time to answer even if we could answer them."

"I'm not so sure," Rey replied. "She could go straight out and go after the Keeper. The best defense is sometimes a good offense."

"But I thought you were concerned about how this might reflect on Winter King's ability to handle this. Is not bringing Ishtar in counter to your own concern?"

"By telling Ishtar a Keeper is after her witches, it could appear Less may be trying to pawn the problem off onto Spring, rather than trying to deal with it himself. This is the first time Winter's ruled in the Duchy. This is Winter's first real challenge. I'm just concerned someone might think Winter was weak and simply handing the problem over to Spring because Less doesn't want to deal with it."

"Once it was decided we should inform the Crowns, that possibility was placed on the table. I withheld any information pertaining to what we know about the killer. I don't see what else I could do."

Rey sighed. "Next time we should ask Less what information he wants passed along," she said. It was too late to change what had happened, and all they could do is hope the Keeper wouldn't decide to alter his plan if

confronted by Ishtar. The fairest completed dialing Richard's number and when it picked up, it went straight to voicemail. "Paladin of Shadows. Two Changelings, one from Autumn, one from Winter, have been murdered by a Keeper earlier tonight. Other supernaturals in Mythic have been targeted as well. The Winter King wishes our Queen to be aware of the situation, and that our motley is working to stop whatever it is the Keeper is up to." She wanted to leave a personal message, but now was not the time, but her voice softened slightly. "I'll call to update you as soon as I can."

—

Less arrived at the rough little economy apartment that Edgar had called home. Apparently, he'd beaten the cops to his apartment, but the first problem was, of course, that the Edgar had left it locked up. The place was on the second floor, but it wasn't hard to get there. It had external stairway access to an open balcony that ran in front the squat, dingy complex.

He didn't have the time to worry about locked doors. A master of portals wasn't going to let a mere mortal deadbolt stop him. A simple calling upon faerie contracts, and the door swung easily open as he turned the knob. He stepped inside and shut it behind him, pausing only to stifle a yawn before going about his search. He checked for notes, phone messages and pencilled reminders in agendas or on the fridge. Anything that could help him understand how Edgar had come to be on that roof.

He found a printed image of himself and Ebony Rose, or at least their Masks, on the refrigerator. It was one of those pictures taken in a booth at a mall where you could choose a colorful frame and then the machine would print up the picture in a style that made it look sort of hand drawn. It was a cheap thing, but Less could tell they were happy. Rose's face was angled up and closer, as if she had been sitting in his lap when the shot was taken.

There was some evidence she'd stayed over. Small containers of Female hair products were in the shower and a spare toothbrush joined Edgar's in a cup next to the bathroom sink. He found a rolled-up pair of nylon stockings in the bedroom, left in the corner.

Edgar didn't have a land line, and without that there was no answering machine. That meant his number went to a cell phone. For so many people these days, it was the only phone he needed. Unfortunately, there was no sign of the cell. Likely it was with him when he died.

Less carefully removed the photograph from it's magnet. It was perfect for the wake he would have to organize. He had hoped this Winter would be free of death to facilitate the healing that everyone needed after the battle with the Goblin King, but it was not to be so. He signed and tucked the photograph into his breast pocket. He wished that Edgar hadn't lived alone. It was his responsibility to break the news to the big lug's friends and family but he wasn't sure he'd have the time considering the current emergency.

He sat down on the worn sofa. The soft cushions felt so warm and comforting on his weary body that he wasn't sure he'd be able to stand again. He took out his own cell phone to call the Summer Lord. It was time to warn his Court of the danger.

A gruff-sounding woman answered, but when he identified himself, she put him through to the King of Summer.

"Hello, Winter King," Jeremiah Storm said.

"Jeremiah, I'm getting the word out to the courts. There seems to be a Keeper performing some kind of ritual in Mythic. Two changelings were sacrificed earlier tonight. I have a team aiming to stop the ritual but you should prepare any court defenses you have against a Keeper threat. I'll keep you informed as best I can."

"Damn," he replied. "Another Keeper threat. Who was killed?"

"Edgar, of Winter, and Ebony Rose, of Autumn. I think the Keeper is after a pair of mortal witches next but get the word out to keep their heads down."

"I will. Whatever the Keeper is up to, it also bodes ill for mortals and changelings alike in the end. When you figure out where he might be, and should diplomacy fail if it hasn't already, call upon the Summer warriors. We stand ready."

"Winter is grateful for your vigilance," he said formally. Less heaved himself reluctantly from the couch and left the premises. Dawn was welling up in the east and the sun filled him with a surge of energy. As he headed over to Rey's house, he wondered if he should stop for groceries. He was starving and desperately needed a coffee.

—

The motley regrouped at Rey's house. They'd all missed a night of sleep by now and were tired. Less was able to dig in and renew his reserves with some snacks Rey had on hand. Mizuko sat at the kitchen table near him while Rey bustled around the kitchen.

They'd only just begun to discuss strategies when Mizuko said, "*Yes, my Queen. Rey's house.*" She appeared to listen, then she said, "*I will tell them.*" Mizuko looked at the faces of her motley mates and stated, "*The Queens of Fear and Desire have received our messages. They are on their way here.*"

Less suddenly wished he'd taken the time to shower. It was a relief to have their support in this. While he felt the motley was handling the situation very well, the mere fact that a Keeper might be involved was reason enough to get all the courts of the Duchy involved. He quickly finished his breakfast and wiped his mouth. Standing at the bathroom mirror, he examined the damage to the elbows of his coat and brushed at the dirt on his knees.

Rey blinked. "I guess it's a good thing I tidied up yesterday," she said with a wry smile. Three of the four Regents in her home at once. At least the toy box was tucked under the bed and out of sight. She laughed softly to herself. If that's all she was worried about, then there was something seriously wrong.

"Hey guys," she said after a moment. "I guess now is a good time to offer you some of my shelf space. Why don't you leave a change of clothes or two here for emergencies?"

Mizuko nodded. She was distracted, a little concerned that rival Queens would be under the same roof.

"Maybe Storm should be called in. Have the whole set here at once." Rey glanced at her friend and read the expression on her face. "I don't think Ishtar and Veridia will let their personal quarrel interfere in this situation. There's too much at stake."

Less came out of the bathroom combing his hair. The mop seemed tamed but once the comb reached his pocket it would quickly droop into his eyes and regain its tangles. "I called him but he seems content to wait until the cavalry needs to be called in."

The group settled down to wait. It wasn't twenty minutes when there was a knock at the door. Rey opened it to discover Ishtar there. She appeared in mundane attire, which contrasted harshly with the Babylonian-style necklaces and bracelets she wore. She also held a long, flat case, such as what was used for some electric guitars.

Rey nodded at her and took a step back and out of the way, allowing Ishtar to enter. Rey's eyes lingered on the case for a moment. It probably didn't contain musical instruments.

Ishtar glided into the living room. It was hard not to stare at every move she made. She made her to the sofa and sat down comfortable. She nodded to the Winter King.

Rey did a quick glance outside and saw nobody else approaching right now, so she closed the door and returned to the living room. "May I offer you something to drink?" she asked Ishtar. "I have water, coffee, tea..." Her voice trailed off. This wasn't exactly a normal social situation, but she couldn't help but follow the rules of hospitality. Ishtar wasn't her enemy.

"Wine, if you have it," Ishtar said. "Something pale and cold would be nice."

Less found a seat at the table. When Rey gestured questioningly to him with a wine glass he said, "It's a tad early. I'm fine with my coffee, thanks." He addressed Ishtar, "Veridia is on her way. Jeremiah decided to leave the preliminaries to us. What's in the case?"

We've been up all night, Rey thought. It's nowhere near early. She poured a glass of riesling and offered it to Ishtar. Rey knew it was good one - it was one of the ones she helped pick out for the Pipe and Fiddle.

Ishtar sampled the wine, then smiled and nodded appreciatively to Rey. She set the wine aside and then picked up the case, facing it toward Less. She flipped the latches and opened it up. Within it Less, Mizuko and Rey saw the gleaming, golden example of Ishtar weapon of choice; the very bow she'd used on the Goblin King. She closed it again and set it aside.

"I take my people's security very seriously." Her tone seemed to indicate her concern encompassed more than just changelings or just witches, but rather all of them together. "And when they are threatened, hurt, or killed, I get very upset."

The coffee was giving Less a jag. He checked his watch. "Where is Veridia? I get the feeling we're on the clock here. Ishtar, I don't know how much Mizuko has told you. This Keeper seems to be performing some sort of ritual. At around noon yesterday two vampires were killed in the subway, representing Earth. Last night around nine, representing Air, two changelings were murdered at the top of Central Tower. We think your witches are next, probably at the fire station near the Blood Tears club."

Ishtar stood. She never seemed to stay motionless for more than a few moments. "I don't know where Veridia is, but we spoke on the phone. She'll be here. I would assume she is verifying Ebony Rose's death."

She paced toward the Winter King. "I have a question for you. What if he does not go after my witches? What then? How do you protect a city that could hide a witch anywhere?"

"We don't know his intended victims will be your witches," Rey interjected. "Working on the idea that he might be acting in a limited area, we looked for the fire station nearest the tower and the murder site in the subway. The one we found is four blocks away from Blood Tears. I know that at least a few of your witches hang out there, it's the most convenient spot." She gave a little shrug. The guess they'd made was as good as any, but they had little enough to go on. "And we've got no idea how much time we have until he strikes again."

Ishtar turned away and paced through the room. "Limited area. That may indicate he is using a particular trod to access the mortal world. Less, do you know of one that might be within four or five blocks of the subway stop, the skyscraper and the firestation?"

There used to be several in the area. Mythic was the hub of changeling society in this part of the country. The recent war with the Goblin King, however, had made the Hedge a dangerous place to visit and only those Trods patrolled by Summer had been safe. The unused roads had grown over (or were maintained as hidden trails by agents of the Bleak Seal). In this area was a small faerie road that led to the west coast. Along the way was a fruitful orchard that supplied the 13th Street Market.

"The Rayada Memorial museum," said Less after he had thought about it. "It documents the indigenous cultures of the area. There is a Gate in one of the exhibits of the Jicarilla Apache." He looked back to Rey, "But concerning the time for the ritual, was there nothing to link the time of the killings to the elements?"

Rey had a pen in her hand, and drew a couple of symbols on a scrap of paper then looked at them thoughtfully. She wrote down a couple other things, then tucked the piece of paper in her pocket. "The best bet I have is between 10 am and noon for Fire, and 1 and 3 am for Water."

Mizuko blinked, mystified.

Rey gave her a little shrug. "Think like the Keeper. Those times and associations seem right to me."

Less wrinkled his brow. The effect was odd without eyes. "What is your reasoning?" he asked. "If Earth was associated with noon, why would Fire be as well?" He looked at his own analog wind-up watch. "Noon and nine point to cardinal directions. I would expect three and six to be involved."

"If the Keeper was going for cardinal directions, I would have gotten a phone call shortly after 3 am about another set of murders," Rey calmly pointed out. "He isn't going to do anything we consider to be remotely logical. They operate on a completely different level of thought than we do" She shook her head. "Regardless, the time for Fire is likely linked to the same reason the Keeper chose the location - it's a time when people start being helped. Or served. Restaurants open then. The soup kitchens start opening their doors."

"Unless the next time in the pattern is six," pointed out Less.

"You can't file away Keepers in neat little boxes and alphabetical files, Less," Rey replied. "And if the next time *is* 6 am, then I should be getting a phone call any time now."

Someone rang the doorbell, causing everyone to jump.

Rey rolled her eyes at herself and went to the door, pausing to look through the peephole, but she saw nothing but a massive chest covered in flannel. She banished the involuntary smile from her face in exchange for a calmer, more serious demeanor and opened the door.

Richard's eye twinkled as he bowed. "Witch of the Bitter Wind, I present Queen Veridia Fear, come for the matter of a murdering Fae Lord in our midst." The Paladin of Shadows made a sweeping gesture, half bow and half presentation, and stepped aside for the queen.

Without hesitation, Rey lowered herself into what would have been a perfect curtsy, had she been wearing a skirt, and then rose again. She stepped aside to allow them through the door. "Please come in." Inwardly she flinched. Was that the right thing to have said? No matter, what was done was done.

Veridia nodded to Rey and moved inside, closely followed by her huge bodyguard. Although she kept her distance from Ishtar, it wasn't necessarily because she was trying to avoid contact with the Spring Queen. Rather, she seemed preoccupied in the current situation.

Veridia asked for an update and was filled in by the others. She then offered, "It seems to me it might be worth our time to intercept this Keeper and attempt negotiations. The goal would be to convince it to hunt elsewhere, of course."

Although Richard wouldn't directly question his queen's wisdom, he couldn't help but worry Veridia was considering sending Rey or Mizuko, or both. "Negotiators might not survive that," he pointed out. "Especially if this one is particularly mad."

Veridia inclined her head. "That is always the risk any time Autumn must negotiate with the Others. We take the same risk in the pursuit of knowledge."

"We're still unsure as to the purpose of the ritual," Rey said. "If we parlay, we may be able to discover that and redirect him."

"We? I had intended to negotiate personally." She threw a glance at Ishtar, but the Spring Queen didn't seem to be paying attention.

Richard's eyebrows shot up. "It is too dangerous and you are too important to risk, my Queen."

"Nice of you to say so, Paladin, but unless there were capable volunteers I would expect this duty to fall squarely upon my shoulders."

Mizuko stepped out in front of the queen and bowed, forgetting for a moment the curtsy Veridia had taught her in her haste. "Allow me, as your Legate, to negotiate in your name, your highness."

Veridia eyed Mizuko and showed a half smile. "Oh my dear. Your enthusiasm is commendable, but didn't I say I needed *capable* volunteers? Negotiation is not your strong suit. Regardless of the traditional duty of the Legate of Mists, you are my voice when I need it to be and no more."

It felt very patronizing to Mizuko, like she'd just been patted on the head and promptly ignored. While Veridia relaxed against a wall, Richard shot a warning glance at Mizuko and Rey not to make an issue of it.

Rey gave him a "who, me?" look right back. "I will take up this task, if you will allow it," she said to Veridia.

"I would, but the final decision is up to the King whose reign this is." Everyone looked at Less.

"I also require capable members on my team," said Less. "Which is why I intend to bring Mizuko and Rey with me when I go to send this Keeper back beyond the Hedge. They have been instrumental in the investigations thus far."

Mizuko gave Less a small smile meant just for him. For what it was worth, she was glad he appreciated her, at least. She was still pretty sure they were going to get killed on this mission, but at least they were together.

Veridia looked a little surprised. "So, you will handle this personally, Winter King?" Ishtar, too, was looking interested at this bit of news. The Queens had not assumed the Winter King would handle this personally past the initial investigation.

Ishtar offered, "Perhaps we should work together on this, following the example of the Winter King's motley."

Veridia studied Ishtar. It was hard to tell if Veridia was suspicious of hidden motivations or if she was simply wondering what Ishtar meant.

"It is Seleman's time to rule, no question. However, a Crown of the Duchy need not stand truly alone against such a dire threat, does he? We can respect his rule while also supporting him."

Veridia nodded. "Of course. Autumn stands ready to assist, but just because Autumn is used to investigating and anticipating actions of the Gentry doesn't mean we would expect Winter to hand authority in this matter over to us."

Ishtar added, "Spring may have fewer resources of use to you, King Seleman. I don't have people skilled in negotiating with the Gentry, nor do I have great warriors at my disposal. I do have myself, however. If you wish, I will accompany you into the Hedge. If your negotiations break down, I can't promise that I can save you, but I can be ready to strike and try to stop this Fae Lord."

Rey was surprised that Less would lead the team into this, given his previous actions to avoid direct conflict. At the same time, she expected him to want to be involved, given Edgar's death.

"As current King of the Duchy, I alone have any authority to carry out legitimate negotiations," said Less. "I will accept any assistance and advice you have to give, however. I cannot, of course, stand alone. I know I have Jeremiah's warriors should I need them, and the Hedge is at Ishtar's beck and call. What can you, Veridia, tell me about dealing with this Keeper? Your Witch tells me that they do not think like us and are impossible to predict. How can we negotiate when we hold no cards and cannot know what they want?"

Veridia seemed glad he asked. "There are some things you can use. First, you know it's likely he wants to kill witches and then shapechangers. Interference with that is sure to annoy him, of course. But you may be able to get some concessions from him. For instance, he will not know how many changelings and fae allies you could bring together. You could pose a threat to him - as far as he knows - and therefore have a perceived advantage in bargaining with him. The goal is to convince this Keeper that the price of continuing to operate here is too high for whatever it is he hopes to gain. It's a gamble since you don't know what that is and he is very unlikely to tell you. But then, it is always a gamble when dealing with the Others. It is worth the risk, no matter how great the risk is, in order to save lives, is it not?"

"I did not say the Gentry are unpredictable, King of Winter," Rey said, her voice calm though she did not appreciate what he'd said.

Veridia looked to mediate between Rey and Less a little bit. "It might not be exactly true that Others are impossible to predict in general, but the way their minds work is unique to each of them and does not need to pay heed to any sense of logic we may have. In that sense, this particular Keeper might be difficult or impossible for us to predict."

"Then I propose this," began Less. "Once we decide when and where the Keeper will strike next, the three of us will go to interrupt the ritual. It will be a moderate show of force, and will bear the marks of good diplomacy, but will not reveal all of our resources. We will require as many forms of communication as possible to make sure a cry for help is heard." He paused to allow everyone to offer suggestions. From what he'd witnessed at the Autumn Court, he suspected Mizuko and Veridia had some form of secret communication.

"Would it not be better to try and prevent him from coming into Mythic at all to start the ritual?" Rey suggested. "If we wait until he starts, he will have already kidnapped and perhaps harmed the witches. As back-up, we have some people at the firehouse, in case we fail." She buried her desire to tell Less off, for she and Mizuko had determined the most likely place and time for the next ritual. What information had he contributed to this, or was he withholding it?

Mizuko tried to stay with the conversation but the look into Rey's future she'd provided the night before had risen to the forefront of her mind once more. Her stomach clenched as the vision of her friend's blood in the water wavered in front of her eyes again. She covered her distress by walking into the kitchen and searching Rey's refrigerator for a beverage. She found a bottle of the same white wine that Rey had given Ishtar. She grabbed it by the stem, then brought a glass down from a nearby cupboard. Veridia had been watching her, so Mizuko raised the bottle to her.

Veridia shook her head. "Thank you, no."

Mizuko left the bottle on the counter and drank some from her glass. Her expression veiled and distant.

Veridia asked, "Is there something on your mind, Mizuko?"

The nymph shook her head and forced a little smile to appear. She wondered if the same grim fate was in store for Less, but she didn't dare calling on her magic. Any of the crowns present might notice it and question her and that would be worse than useless. Fate was unavoidable, after all, and her predictions had never been wrong. Why tell the others what she knew to be true? They would either refuse to believe it was an unavoidable fate, like Rey did, or they would lose hope and merely go through the motions of token resistance as they marched inevitably to their deaths. That was no way to live, or to die.

She couldn't get it out of her own mind, however, so she took another drink in hopes the fuzziness of a good buzz might ease her worry.

Rey looked at Richard, hoping he could read in her glance that she knew what was troubling the nymph, but he didn't seem to catch on. With a slight frown, Rey looked back at Mizuko and saw how quickly her friend was drinking. "Mizuko, drinking enough to get your thoughts all fuzzy isn't going to help," she said kindly. "We all need to be at the top of our game right now."

"Fair enough, Rey." said Less. Lack of sleep and the caffeine had him focusing on the ritual. "I'm not convinced a Gentry will need so mundane a thing as a changeling trod to venture into Mythic, but it's as good a place as any to set up a welcome party. The backup can wait at or near the fire house. I'll phone Storm to send his Summer warriors."

"And what of Ishtar's offer?" Rey prompted. "Her presence would lend support to the negotiations."

"She is our strongest asset. Rumours of her driving out the Goblin King must be well known. I was thinking if we keep her in reserve then our true strength can only be imagined. I am open to advice on this matter."

Ishtar nodded her approval with the plan. "If nothing else I can at least keep him occupied for a little while the rest of you escape. It's hard to predict how powerful one of the Gentry really is outside of their Arcadia. In their home, of course, they have the power of a god. Outside their home, in the Hedge or the mortal realm, their power can vary greatly from one Fae Lord to another."

"*I will do that, Queen Ishtar,*" Mizuko said.

"Pardon?"

"*I mean, that if negotiations break down, I will hold off the Keeper until my friends escape and until you can kill it with your bow.*"

Ishtar's lips twitched in amusement. She looked to Veridia. "You have a brave Legate, Queen Veridia."

Veridia looked at Mizuko, her eyes calculated. Finally she nodded. "Some of her talents lie along lines of combat and defends. So does certain other talents." She stared at Mizuko, until the nymph took another drink of her wine to avoid the gaze.

"Something tells me our Legate is not certain of success here."

Mizuko didn't say anything, but as the eyes of the rest of the party fell upon her, she finally conceded to the pressure. "*I looked into Rey's future. It seems short, for I saw her in water and there was a lot of blood.*"

Veridia's eyes were calculating again, so Mizuko hurried to add, "Yes. My powers of prediction as an oracle have grown. I can see the most significant events of a subjects life in the near-term. "

Ishtar said, "Prophecy, visions of the future, is an art that can be misleading, Legate. And I'm told the future is fluid, always changing. Are you certain what you saw means our attempt will be unsuccessful."

Mizuko shook her head. "*No. But I have a bad feeling about it.*"

"I cannot let a potential event keep me from performing my duty," Rey said. "Our choices change everything. Just because one knows what might happen, no matter how horrible and dangerous it might be, does not mean it will happen for certain." She didn't look at Ishtar, though her words applied not only to the current situation but to one they two had recently discussed in private.

"Then I will suggest we take an hour to prepare ourselves and gather any equipment we require," said Less. "Rey, Mizuko and myself will wait at the Trod Gate. Ishtar and half of the Summer warriors will wait in or nearby the museum, but separate from the gate. The rest will wait at or near the fire house in case the Keeper passes us by. Anything else?"

Veridia said her Paladin would assist Ishtar and remain on hand with her. No one seemed to have anything to add so arrangements were made and people mobilized.

—

The changelings were able to assemble by nine in the morning. While the firestation itself was occupied by mortals, the changelings couldn't be inside it without seeming very conspicuous. Summer chose to take up positions nearby, hidden in cars and waiting on sidewalk benches at bus stops.

Getting into the museum wasn't a problem. While it was locked until it opened at noon, Ishtar, Rey, and Less all had abilities that would let them inside safely and without tripping alarms. Mizuko and Richard ducked inside with Less, whose little spell would likely cost him his home being robbed blind to balance the books with his use of a Goblin Contract. That mattered little compared to what was at stake here.

Custodial crews and caretakers were already here and preparing the museum for the day, but they were few in number. Luck was with them this time as well; the Gate was near the door they'd used to enter the building. Before attention was drawn, the group had opened the Gate and was through to the Hedge.

Ishtar and Richard chose to take a position just off the path, fashioning the Hedge to screen them from easy view, while Less and his motley took up position to block the path.

Rey knew they were as prepared as they possibly could be. She wished she'd had a chance before now to finish the mate to the bracer Richard wore, and hoped that things did not end up in violence. Now, all that there was left to do was wait - and hope she and Mizuko were right about what the Keeper's next move was going to be.

Less would have been happier meeting the True Fae in the mortal realm. They had more control of the communications there and the Gentry might be at a disadvantage. However, the Gate was in a public place. Although the number of people who visited the indigenous culture museum were very small, they risked trespassing charges and, worse, their sanity. Changelings relied on the clear distinction between the Hedge and Reality. Despite the Mask, if mortals were exposed to the world of Fae that separation would crumble and so would their grip on reality.

He placed the strange bonsai tree that Rover had fashioned next to the path. It seamlessly merged with the Hedge at Ishtar's coaxing. Even now, Rover was at the motley's Hollow monitoring everything that was said in this place. At any sign of trouble, he would be on the phone to the reserve forces at the museum and fire station. Less shifted the flare gun in his jacket pocket, balancing its bulk under his arm. He wasn't sure if their situation would require such a signal, but better safe than sorry. He settled in to wait.

The eerie light of the Arcadian sun glared down on them with a bleary, tired intensity that blunted their perceptions. The full weight of missing a night's sleep pressed down on the Winter King's motley as minutes, then hours passed while they awaited the arrival of a deadly adversary. Ten in the morning passed, then ten thirty.

Then the Gate opened and a bloodied Summer warrior staggered through. "He's coming!" The hound-headed beast of Summer appeared to want to say more, but he collapsed. Ishtar moved quickly, snatched up his ankle and pulled him clear of the path.

It was barely in time, for the Gate wavered to life again. This time, a hulking form strode through. In only a few long, easy strides he was past Ishtar and Richard's hiding place and nearly upon Less, Mizuko, and Rey. The man was built thickly, but wrapped in worn cloth held in place with stained leather straps. One hand was missing, replaced by a rust-red hook that dripped with fresh blood. Over his face he wore a black mask that shadowed his eyes. There were breathing holes and the mouth was covered in a grill of vertical metal bars. Something glittered in the eye holes of the Death Dealer's mask as it looked at the Winter King, Witch of the Bitter Wind and the Legate of Mists.

The motley realized with terrifying certainty that whatever this Keeper had come to do, he'd already done it and was leaving. Two witches were likely already dead. Now all that was left was to hope to divert this killing machine from killing shapeshifters next.

From depleted reserves, adrenaline once again kicked into gear in Less' brain. He could barely process the horror of the creature that now bore toward him. How would he even get hold of this monster's attention. He almost leaped off the path but the hooked hand reminded him of Edgar and gave him resolve. He drew his sword and pointed it at the ground between the True Fae and the motley. "Why are you killing supernaturals?" he shouted. "Why do you sacrifice the people of earth, air, fire and water in my domain?"

Laughter bubbled from the Keeper's mask. Mizuko shrank away from it in revulsion.

"If the changeling wants answers, then the changeling must take them," it said in a damaged, gravelly voice. "Step aside."

Although disgusted, Mizuko seemed fearless. She stood her ground and even shifted protectively, a half step in front of and to Less's left.

Rey couldn't help but take a step back and toward the edge of the path.

"Answer!" cried Less. "We've seen neither hide nor hair of the Goblin King since he crossed our path."

The Hook appeared to be puzzled at Less's remark, but he addressed Less's demand. "The ritual requires it, King of Winter. Step aside."

"We will not! Why are you performing such a ritual in my Duchy?"

"To get the attention of Iron, so that I might forge at last a new Contract." He chuckled menacingly.

"That's insane!" Mizuko cried. She would know.

"No more warnings. Step aside Winter King." The huge Keeper moved *fast*. Far faster than his size should have indicated. The hook that lashed out had been meant to open Less's neck, but Mizuko had been standing ready, fully prepared to take a shot for her friend. She deftly shoved the hook down and away, even as she stepped directly in front of the murderous Keeper. Despite her skill and determination, the Hook still managed to open a gash on her leg.

"We have to stop him," Rey said, her voice stricken. "We can't let him win. We can't let their deaths be in vain!"

Rey cast a spell and she began to move in flowing ways that would make her difficult to strike. Less called up swirling air to help deflect any blows that might come his way. Richard, however, charged with a bellowing battle cry. He thundered into the Keeper with bone-shattering power, driving his axe deep into the Hook's body while Ishtar calmly sniped, sinking an arrow into the Hook's body as well.

The Hook was very angry. He wheeled away from Mizuko to turn on Richard. Magical Armor snaked out from Richard's bracer in time to help fend off the Keeper, but the attack was of a form Richard did not expect. The Hook touched him with his good hand, sending shudders and convulsions ripping through the stout Minotaur's body.

Rey advanced, then, using her body to block the path between the Hook and her motley mates while Mizuko backed away and activated her own defenses. The nymph took on a body of solid ice.

Less took the opportunity to send bolts of air smashing into the Keeper. It had no effect, where normally Less would have expected some concussive damage at least.

Richard attempted to keep up the pressure on the Hook despite the convulsions and spasms. Despite the crippling effects, his axe managed to bite the Keeper again as Ishtar again, with perfect timing, hits the Keeper with another arrow.

The Hook, concentrating entirely upon Richard seemed to swell with power, then struck at Richard. With a single, massive blow, the Minotaur is torn open across his sternum and flung backwards into a skid that lands him at the foot of the Hedge Gate. He's unconscious and bleeding. Rey screamed at that and threw herself at the Keeper, who then turned on her, determined to remove her and the rest of the motley from his path.

Mizuko gathered flame about her and launched burning shards of ice at the Hook. She missed, leaving burning holes in the surrounding Hedge

Less shifts tactics. With his control over Air, he could help guide Mizuko's assault, making her lobbed burning ice shards into a sort of guided missiles.

Ishtar fired another carefully aimed shot, the third to penetrate the Hook's body.

The Hook responded by ripping the arrows out. His wounds have closed, as if he took power from downing Richard. His swipe at Rey was meant to cut her in half, but she dances out of the path of the deadly hook. Still, she was shocked to find a scratch across her midsection seeping blood. The Hook seemed to gain even more strength.

Less and Mizuko combine their efforts and it pays off. Burning slivers of ice penetrate the Hook's hide with sizzling furor. Ishtar struck him again with yet another arrow of stiffened vine and obsidian tip.

The Hook swiped again at Rey, but she was ready for it and ducked under his arm. Mizuko and Less combine their effort, striking the Hook again while Ishtar continued her sniping attacks. The back and forth continued. Rey had to activate her spell again to keep her defenses up. Slowly, the Hook began to look weakened again. But it was costly. Mizuko looked pale and unfocused. The strain was also having an effect upon the rest of them as well.

The Keeper switched tactics and tried to touch Rey. She realized what he was doing at the last moment and danced out of the way while he roared in pain and rage. The changelings were startled and shaken by his

roars.

Then the Hook swelled with power once more. He spun and moved toward Rey. He was too fast to outrun and too big to avoid. Rey took an injury that broke rib and cut her under her right arm. She almost fell from shock and pain.

Then Mizuko was there. *"Back away! I have him."* She advanced on the Keeper screaming, *"By Fire and Ice, I will kill you!"*

Less was started. Mizuko's frozen form again reminds him of the Ice Queen, the Keeper who had his heart. Burning with a white halo of fire, she advanced on the Keeper. They were both suddenly engulfed in roaring flames of such heat Less and Rey were forced to backpedal. Even so, the heat sucked the moisture from their faces. Rey couldn't see past the inferno, but Less caught sight of the cause of this. Ishtar had dropped her bow and was now directly manipulating the Hedge.

It was an impressive feat, one he'd seen no other changeling match outside of a Hedge Duel. The Hedge responded to strong Wyrld, of course, but the effect was always unconscious. Less also realized that the burning environment wouldn't harm Mizuko, if she'd been smart enough to use her power over Elemental Fire to protect herself from it. It would, however, undoubtedly burn the Keeper. Realization dawned — Ishtar had taken an awful risk in assuming Mizuko would survive this, but she was now aiding Mizuko directly. And, he could greatly enhance the fire by literally fanning the flames.

Rey opened fire with her forty cal Smith and Wesson while Mizuko pounded on the Hook inside a burning inferno hot enough to reduce bone to dust and metal to molten slag. She wasn't sure what effect she was having because her hands were shaking so badly from pain and shock.

The battle raged on. The Hook with multiple, lightning-quick strikes that drew white marks across Mizuko's frozen body. Yet, instead of falling, Mizuko's body grew taller and appeared to be even stronger, as if feeding upon the power and violence going on around her.

And Less could see her now. Mizuko had somehow become or channeled the Ice Queen. Somehow, he was certain, the Ice Queen was *inside* Mizuko!

But how?

The Hook thrashed wildly under Mizuko's continued assault. Unable to escape the fire that seemed to run after him where ever he moved, he lashed out, destroying Hedge and earth alike. Mizuko pursued, but it seemed a fatal mistake when he raised himself up and she came down on her with all his remaining might. The hook embedded into her forehead. Cracks raced down her body and for a frozen moment, flames escaped the cracks like blood.

She didn't fall. Instead, she thrust her hands into the Hook's wounds and funneled her combined power of ice and fire. The Hook's chest exploded and he collapsed.

Ishtar lowered the fire and Less's wind grew still. Mizuko toed the ashen remains of the Keeper.

"The Hook is a Keeper and cannot truly die," she said in a strained voice. Although laden with pain, the voice was familiar to Less. *"But this form is destroyed and his plans are ended. It will be some time before he can build a new body."* She kicked the smoking, bronze-colored hook (all that was left of the Keeper) into the Hedge and turned to Ishtar.

"I plead for your aid. Without it, I will die soon."

Ishtar said nothing, though her eyes were fixed upon Mizuko. Mizuko came to her under her own power

and knelt on the ground near Richard. Ishtar stared sadly down at them. Finally, she said, "I have no magic left to help you. Let's get this bleeding under control, then we can get you and Richard help."

Ishtar went to work on Richard first, again using her power over the Hedge to provide suitable materials for tourniquets and bandages. He was able to stabilize him, so that he wouldn't bleed to death.

She then looked at Mizuko, but there wasn't anything she could tourniquet, and fire burned through bandages. Mizuko released her elemental forms and defenses, then collapsed. She looked like herself again but she was far more hurt than when she was in her elemental form. Unconscious and quickly bleeding to death, Ishtar looked up Less helplessly. "I-I'm sorry Winter King. I haven't the strength left to heal her with magic and her injuries are beyond my ability to treat."

Rey bent to work on Mizuko's injuries. The nymph was bleeding fast, but Rey was able to patch her up using the Spring Queen's makeshift bandages and cut the blood loss down.

Richard was going to need some powerful magical healing, or a trip to the hospital however. Mizuko was in the same condition, at least until she was well enough to eat goblin fruit.

Ishtar shook the fallen Summer warrior awake and sent him through the Gate to get to carry the wounded.

Less dove into the local Hedge, pushing away the withering leaves that went before the effect of his Winter mantle. He hunted for some form of healing fruit or for the giant seed pods in which changelings were sometimes found frozen in stasis. Thorns tore at his clothes and stabbed at his body as if the Hedge selfishly sought to keep its bounty to itself. But he quickly did find something of use in the bountiful Hedge; something un-singed or damaged in the battle. It was called Jarmyn. This plant had both several leaves available as well as fruit.

The leaves were a kind of stimulant, something that would keep a changeling awake when they might otherwise be exhausted. The fruit acted in a similar way, though the effect was less immediate. Instead the jarmyn fruit would keep a changeling awake longer than they might otherwise. Neither leaf or fruit had healing properties, but Less remembered that Mizuko's metabolism was more akin to the Arcadian bodies of Keepers and the fae of the Hedge than to that of changelings or humans. The magic that allowed the fruit to exist here would be used not only to provide the expected benefit of the fruit, but also to heal.

Less cut a large fruit-bearing branch from the Jarmyn plant and dragged it back to the smoking crater in which Mizuko lay. He stripped the leaves from the branch and crumpled them in his hands to get the juices flowing. He carefully flattened out each leaf and laid them on Mizuko's wounds. They clung to her skin like Saran Wrap, seemingly of their own volition. When he was done, he sliced one of the fruit in half and squeezed it into Mizuko's upturned mouth. He watched it wet her lips, her tongue lick them. He had a memory of his Ice Queen's mouth, the sensual red against the pale, pale skin. He couldn't remember what she was saying but he could remember how they pressed together, how they moved. A glimpse of ivory teeth, touched by tongue. He kissed that mouth.

Her lips were as cool as he remembered, her faint breath no more than a stirring of cool mint. Rarely did he remember her truly kissing back, but this time he thought she responded, her lips moving against his. His heart, so empty for so long, began pounding so hard he thought it might burst from his chest.

He opened his eyes. Shock caused his heart to skip in surprise as he realized it was only Mizuko beneath his touch.

Rey knelt next to Richard, remembering the last time she's seen him so injured. She knew he'd recover, though it may be a while. She tried very hard not to fuss and to touch him as she longed to do, but this was neither the time nor the place. She settled for a single, gentle caress of his cheek before returning to Mizuko to check on her handiwork.

For a few minutes, Mizuko didn't move as the leaves sank into her skin and the juice from the fruit slid down her throat. The wound on her head looked the worst; Less was pretty sure she had a concussion and a fractured skull, but at least the leaf he laid there covered it.

Rey became aware of several Summer warriors. One was an earth elemental with skin of granite, one was a fire elemental with flaming hair, and another couple were ogres big enough to have come from the King's own guard. They looked like they'd been in battle as they all carried wounds. They seemed superficial, however. The earth elemental knelt down next to Richard and took a quick inventory of his injuries. He shook his head. "He needs a stretcher. His wounds will reopen if he's jostled too much." The ogres disappeared back through the Gate to retrieve what was needed from the fire station.

The fire elemental was watching Mizuko next to Less. The elemental asked bluntly, "Is she dead, Winter King?"

As Less watched the leaf he'd placed over her forehead disappeared completely, leaving perfect, unscarred flesh behind. Her eyes were both still black and blue and there might be internal injuries yet, but he could see three other wounds were closing.

Her eyes opened and it seemed to Less they focused on him first. "*I'm so sorry,*" she said. Speaking obviously hurt a great deal. But now Less could see two more leaves had disappeared as well as the injuries they had covered. "*I meant to fight that Keeper ... I blacked out. Must... have walked right over me.*" She hesitated to ask but she had to know. "*Everyone... okay?*"

Less wiped his mouth with a shaking hand. The vision was dispelled, though he still felt cold in his bones. Fatigue washed over him. "The Keeper is gone. Everyone is okay, now. Can you sit up?"

Mizuko cautiously raised herself up on her elbows and winced. She rose to a sitting position and regretted it. "*My head feels like it is splitting open.*" She caught site of Richard being lifted onto a stretcher and stared with unvoiced concern.

"Ishtar," Rey said, "can you recommend a member of your Court who might be willing and able to heal Richard's injuries? Enough that he can be up and on his feet again?"

Ishtar nodded and smiled. "Of course. I'll make a call when we leave the Hedge. Just make sure they bring him to the shoe shop near the corner of 25th and 18th street. Someone who can take care of his injuries will meet you there."

"I appreciate it," Rey replied. She walked over to the ogres carrying Richard and let them know what they needed to do.

After watching them leave, Rey looked to where Mizuko had kicked Hook's hook into the brambles and thorns. Such an object would have great power. If it could be used for the benefit of the Duchy.... She moved over to where she'd seen it disappear into the dangerous foliage. Squatting down, she hoped it might be close.

"You don't remember anything about you burning the Keeper...your ice form...?" Less asked Mizuko. He looked at her intently, remembering her growing in size - much like Cass had done when she joined the Goblin King.

A dream-like, thoughtful look settled upon the nymph's features. "*I remember setting my ice on fire and*

hurling it at the Keeper with the hook. It seemed like the wind was helping. I thought it was you. Then Rey was hurting and I went in to take her place so she could get free of him. Everything exploded into fire. I'm not sure what happened. I remember something hitting me in the head and I blacked out. I thought I was going to die. Then I..." Mizuko's eyes slid away, a little smile tugging at the corners of her lips, *"I thought someone kissed me, but there was only you and Rey here."*

"That's right," said Less gently. "We all helped but you took the brunt of the Keeper's wrath. It was...beautiful to watch." He found it hard to look away, in case she manifested his queen again.

Rey spotted a gleam of bronze colored metal. The Hedge was relatively sparse here, this close to the mortal real, but it had apparently hit a big plant like a lilac bush and fallen into the tangle of roots at its base. Rey would have to reach past long thorns to but she thought it was just within arms reach.

She steadied herself and, with one eye on the bush, slowly and carefully reached through the tiny gap for the hook. Her fingers traces the metal. It was hot like a pan fresh out of the dish washer, but it didn't burn. Carefully, she withdrew her gleaming prize.

Something caught the back of her hand, stabbing her and raking her skin as she drew out the Keeper's weapon. She felt the plant lean toward her hand as if to prevent her from getting away. It had tasted her blood and licked at her remaining pool of magic and it wanted more. Rey jerked her hand free with a hiss of pain. She looked at her hand. The scratch was superficial, but painful. More importantly, she had the Keeper's Hook.

"Gee, thanks Audrey," Rey murmured as she looked at the gleaming hook in her hand. Part of her desperately wanted to keep it. The power it represented. It was literally part of a Keeper. But it was that very fact that made her hesitate. When Hook's body reformed, would it be around this hook, or would he manifest another one? She worried her lower lip between her teeth for a moment, then turned and joined Less and Mizuko.

"Mizuko," she signed in the motley's secret language, "will you figure out what properties this has for me?" Rey didn't look at Less, keeping her attention fully on the nymph.

The nymph's eyes widened as she looked at the evil weapon in Rey's hands. But she nodded. Better to know what they were dealing with if they were keeping the thing.

"Is there anything you'd like in return for your help?"

"That belonged to a Keeper. It seems to me I've identified things like that before and it was very difficult, though I've never failed to figure it out." Mizuko thought about it and said, *"If you want to give me something for this, just give me what you think the work is worth. I don't haggle for my services."*

It was her way of doing business. If she felt someone abused her service or insulted her by paying her too little for the identification of a valuable item, she simply didn't do business with them again — and told the other sorceresses in the Duchy about it. This habit had a way of creating generous clients. And those who discovered they'd shortchanged her eventually found a way to make up the difference.

"Hopefully I'll have something for you in a day or two," Rey signed, already thinking about what she could give - or do - for Mizuko that would be worth the time and effort it would take to ferret out the hook's secrets.

"Just be sure to keep it in a safe place," said Less. He wondered again where Claire had secreted the axe and quilt.

"I'm sure putting the hook on a pedestal in my front yard, lit up by a dozen floodlights, is an adequate

security plan," Rey replied in a light tone, biting back a chuckle. Of course she would put it somewhere safe. Somewhere secret.

"Let's get you home, Miz," said Less, helping her to her feet and putting her arm over his shoulders, "and into bed."