

Rey set the large pitcher of ice water next to the other beverages on the table and joined her friends at the table in her kitchen. It was the only place Rey had had a chance to thoroughly clean up the bloodstains Mizuko had left behind. She was taking an extended lunch break from work so they could all talk about what had happened at the Hollow, and make some plans for the future.

She selected up a sandwich from the tray she'd ordered from French Quarter, a bistro located in the Mountain Garden Hotel and Casino where she was the general manager. "We need to talk about what happened at the hollow, and what we can do to help prevent it from happening again," she said before she took a bite of her food.

A young mortal woman with long brown hair and dark eyes wearing a light leather jacket walked into the house via the kitchen door. She looked around and gave those seated at the table a brief nod and then shed her jacket. She was wearing a skirt that rode low on her hips since otherwise it would have been scandalously short. Her top was little more than a black bra with fine, decorative silver chains that draped from it and drew attention to the smooth, pale skin of her tummy. She wore a half dozen silver necklaces that sported crosses arrayed randomly across her chest. She reached into a pocket to remove a set of brass knuckles (literally made out of shiny brass, not steel or iron) from her jacket so it wouldn't damage the counter top when she dropped her coat on the kitchen counter. She put the brass fist weapon down on top of her coat, then hopped up on the counter and stared back at the others.

Rey stared at the young woman for a moment. "Mizuko, I really don't want to cook supper on the counter where your butt has been sitting." The clothes her friend was wearing was certainly not what she'd expected Mizuko to be wearing. Miz was supposed to be working today, and that scanty outfit didn't meet the dress code. So what was she up to? Whatever it was, that discussion would have to wait until later.

She rolled her eyes and signed, "You usually bring take out."

"That's because I haven't mastered the skill of cooking for one or two people," Rey replied with a chuckle. "I'm used to cooking for an army."

Mizuko looked puzzled. Her hands rapidly signed, "You're an army cook?"

Rey's chuckle turned into a full blown laugh. "You've obviously never seen an hungry werewolf eat." She shook her head, amused at the turn of the conversation. "Once upon a time, I used to work at a diner."

Mizuko frowned in puzzlement. "They eat at diners? The movies are really messed up then. I didn't know you worked at a diner."

"I used to work at a diner before I was Taken, and before I met the werewolves I know," Rey explained. "And yes, they do eat at diners. And at just about every other kind of restaurant."

"I want to meet one," Mizuko said with determined gestures. "If they are real I want to know what they are like when I see them in the future."

"You already have," Rey replied with a slight smile.

"Who?"

"We'll talk about this later," Rey said. "I'm sure Simon, Rover and Less aren't the slightest bit interested in my romantic conquests, and given I've only got about an hour and a half before I have to be at a meeting with the New Mexico Gambling Commission, we need to get down to business."

"Of course we're interested in your romantic conquests," Simon said. "At least one of us." But he was mostly joking. He did file the information away for later, though. "Okay, so who has an idea of how to protect the

Hollow? That's kind of outside my usual field."

Mizuko looked at Rey with narrowed eyes. Now she *knew* Rey was doing that on purpose to lead her on. Just for that, she wiggled her ass on the counter as if she was settling in for a long stay. Deciding that Simon's question a a lead-in for some motley brainstorming, Mizuko voiced her suggestion. *"Aside from keeping it secret? In the near future I should be able to turn the spring into a semi-permanent elemental guardian that will surveil the Hollow and activate if someone or something threatens it. A very large elemental greater in strength and power to any single one of us."*

"That's impressive, Mizuko," Rey said in admiration. "Our biggest current weakness right now, as I see it, is that we have nothing to prevent or hinder flying things from locating and entering the hollow." She looked at Rover. "What kinds of things do you think you could come up with for that?"

Less slipped in without a sound and sat down almost without being noticed. He was wearing his train station uniform. Rover sat with a furrowed brow and when he was still pondering the question after Less had poured himself some coffee he quietly apologised for being late. "The train station is a mad house today. A child was separated from her mother. At our recent frequency of evoking the Fae Contracts I couldn't bring myself to reunite them immediately."

Mizuko tilted her head in curiosity. "What did you do with the child?"

"Oh, she is safely with her mother now," replied Less. "But a child's tears are such a wonderful expression of love and the helplessness of utter dependency."

Simon, who had been raised not to comment on other people's food choices, said "Hi, Less. We were just discussing how we might shield the Hollow from discovery from above. And Rey brought us sandwiches."

"They're from one of the restaurants at the casino," she added. Rey didn't go into details, how the old menu wasn't worth the dime store paper it was printed on. Or how satisfying their fear was when they realized they wouldn't be able to just coast along with substandard fare the previous manager let them get away with. It was especially delightful when she sacked the head chef in front of the entire staff, including the guys who scrubbed the floors. She'd was going to do it anyway, but it was his vastly unwelcome physical advances that made her decide an example needed to be made. It wasn't until security showed up to escort him out of the building he realized she was telling the truth - that she was his boss and really could fire him. "We're still fine tuning the mufaletta sandwich, but it's pretty close to perfect now."

"It's good," Simon said. "Where do you get this salami?... wait, later. Defending our Hollow now. One thing I might be able to do is provide us some weapons. Rover could build us machineguns, but he's busy enough, and I found this guy online who makes old-style crossbows out of real wood and metal. Composites do weird stuff when you leave them in the Hedge too long. People a lot better with Spring Contracts than me can make the plants grow. If we don't come up with something better, I could look into learning how to do that."

"The problem with weapons," Rey said, "is we have to be there to use them. We need something to act as a security system, to keep them out so we don't have to fight them in the first place."

*"Any defense may be overcome in the Hedge," Mizuko said. "Rover will tell you that it is a simple matter for fae to destroy any tech but the simplest device with a touch of magic. Technology from this world is probably the weakest form of security we could bring to a magical place. Let Rover begin work on magical automatons that can respond intelligently to threats, just as an elemental would. Also, Less, I can teach you to commune with Air. In time, you too could call forth intelligent and loyal elemental allies of the air that can guard our piece of sky."*

Simon was totally focused on Mizuko when he asked "How long do you think that'll take, roughly?" Then he

shook off the fascination enough to pay more attention to everyone. "The reason I suggested the crossbows is that I could pick them up in a few days, maybe two weeks. I know they're not a very good defense, but they're better than nothing and they give us *something* until we can get all these other cool defenses set up. You always want the best you can get, but sometimes you have to settle for the best you can do right now. The whole mess with the vileshrike would have been easier if we had a couple crossbows laying around, for instance.

"For that matter, I could probably get us some temporary camouflage to hide the construction supplies and cover our work for a while. Not as good as magic, but I can afford it, and we can do it now."

Mizuko shrugged and then signed, "If you want one, buy it. You needn't worry about such a weapon for me but thanks for the thought."

"Well, yeah," Simon agreed. "I was thinking for folks who can't throw deadly ice spears and stuff. And crossbows are quieter than guns."

She nodded with a little smile, acceding the point.

"As good as it sounds to have some kind of weapons there," Rey said, "I don't know if it's such a good idea to leave weapons - even those as mundane as crossbows - lying around the hollow where anyone can take them. I certainly wouldn't want to be thought of as supplying arms to the enemy, even if they were stolen."

Mizuko thought about Rover's situation, but didn't bring it up. Instead she suggested, "They could be hidden."

"They don't really have to be kept in the Hollow," Simon said. "Near any of our Doors is probably good enough. And a couple crossbows might be odd to own, but not illegal. It's really not a big deal. A lack of ranged weapons caused us a problem yesterday. Today, it's pretty easy to fill that void. I ordered a much better first aid kit, some field surgery tools, and other medical supplies online today." "He turned to Mizuko, "But don't get shot again any time soon, okay?"

"This discussion is very useful," said Less. "Rey is correct in pointing out the dangers of having intruders use our weapons against us, but by ensuring they are properly secured we can be better prepared for the dangers of the Hedge."

"On the topic of hollow defenses and the like," continued Less. "I will have to book off some time to work on another project. I will need Rover's skills but I could probably use help from the whole motley, if you are willing and have the time."

Mizuko signed immediately. "Less, you know that my queen has asked me to put my skills at your disposal. It is a priority. And, I would be happy to help you with whatever you need, even if she hadn't asked. What is it you would like help with?"

"I've got obligations at the casino I simply can't avoid," Rey added, " and I haven't been working there long enough to take a lot of time off. I'll help you as much as I can, though."

"I trust that anything discussed here today will remain between us," began Less. "What do any of you know about the Dusk Court? Though they claim to want to rid us of the Goblin King and his followers, their leaders and motives are a mystery to the Duchy. I hope to gather reliable information about this new Court without tipping them off and putting them on their guard. They responded to the report I wrote about our dealings in Circledell. They want my help to mount a raid to destroy the Goblin King's troops garrisoned there as well as the evil hob kin responsible for the murder of the original inhabitants. Since this is clearly something we would all value I intend to help them, but I want to monitor their means and effectiveness and try to discover their true motives. With Rover's help, I will be able to keep them under surveillance during their planning,

but it would also be helpful to have observers in the field during their raid."

"I'll help," Simon said. "I had a plan that still might be workable to get a group in close. The Dusk warriors aren't likely to want me as a fighter, but I can heal for them."

"I know the names of their leaders," Mizuko signed. "They gave me a car, " she spelled out 'porsche', "in exchange for some work I did for them last Spring. One is named Richard. He is the Beast that resembles a minotaur. The woman is a Fairest, probably draconic. Her name is Claire."

Less hated to be kept in the dark. "You have a car?" he sputtered. "What sort of job did you do for them - or is that how they have been come to be known as the Glacial Axe?" he asked, referring to her deadly control over ice.

"I had a car," Mizuko corrected. "As it turns out, I'm a poor driver. I think I must have killed three trees. Then I guess the city didn't like where I left it parked and they took it away. Which is fine, since I didn't have actual ownership papers anyway and no ID to tie it to me if I wanted to. I don't feel bad about it, though. It was a lot of fun for about thirty minutes. I suppose it was fair trade. They were very happy that I identified a couple of Tokens for them. One was a weapon — an axe actually, that was cursed to grant control over the wielder of the axe to the axe's maker. In short, it was a trap, probably left for them to find by the Goblin King or some other bad person. They were pretty glad I spotted that for them before they tried to use it.

"As for the name, The Glacial Axe had their name, I gather, long before I came along."

"That is good information, and so far supports their intentions," said Less. "It is said that their court numbers a few dozen. Does anyone know any of them personally?"

Rey was torn on the subject of "assisting" the Glacial Axe with their attack on Circledell. While she wanted to see the settlement cleansed of the Goblin King's influence, she really didn't see the point. The original inhabitants are long gone, and the vacuum created by the current residents will result in something else moving in; possibly something worse.

Perhaps the biggest stumbling block for Rey getting enthusiastic enough to risk turning the cold war with the Goblin King hot again was a lack of personal involvement. All of this - the attack on Circledell and the death of the previous Legate of the Mists - happened before Rey arrived in the Duchy. She didn't know any of the people involved, no inherent stake (or need) in wanting to get revenge.

One thing that did make Rey curious about the Glacial Axe was the source of their finances. Where did they get the Porsche they paid Mizuko with?

"I don't know any one of them well," Mizuko signed in Glymjack. "But there is usually someone representing the Glacial Axe at freehold events. Richard and Claire also often meet with the reigning king or queen privately to discuss the war, tactics, things like that."

"Do you think they might be a danger to the Duchy?" Rey asked Less.

"I don't really," replied Less. "The problem is that I don't know anything about them. I intend to learn more so that on the off-chance they do harbour nefarious purposes we aren't blind-sided."

"You're not worried about their attack getting open warfare going again?"

"You know I am," sighed Less. "I was the one who so avidly cautioned Mizuko against open conflict when we were there last. I just get the feeling that they are going to find their way to this fight whether I help them or not. It's my chance to get the information I'm looking for and I'm going to take it." Not knowing anything about the Dusk Court was really getting under his skin. He took a breath to calm himself down. "Maybe we

can find out if they, in their recklessness, intend to take the Duchy with them into their kamikazi mission and do something to stop it."

The situation was tricky. Simon would have preferred to get to know the Dusk members gradually and feel them out over time, but Less was probably right to push things. If the Glacial Axe was a scam, best to know it now. If they were well-meaning, but foolish, best to be in a position to exert influence soon. The slow approach was like a football pass. Only three things could happen, and two were bad.

"You want Rover to build bugs for you. Do you have anything specific in mind from the rest of us? I have duties to Spring, but within those constraints, I'm here to help. You and my Queen are acquainted. I think she'll be disposed to help you."

"I'd like to do more than just build bugs. Unless you're talking about the giant-man-eating variety." Rover finally spoke up. "I want to talk to their tacticians and see if I can shore up their strategies with some enhanced gear. After all, we don't know for sure that this is just going to be frontal assault, right? Less used the word 'raid' before and that makes me think more of guerrilla operations.

"If we're going to help them do this, after all, we might as well do what we can to help them win."

Less thought about it. "I don't want to tip them off, but it might be good to have players on the inside. If they don't decide to plan inside my hollow, I don't get any information. Mizuko has a strong desire for wanting this raid to happen, Simon possibly has a trade contact in Circledell that the Dusk Court might be interested in. Certainly, they couldn't refuse Rover's help. If you approached them you might be able to steer them in the direction I want. As long as you make sure to leave them well enough alone that they feel free to talk. And if you don't like that, Rover and I could always use help setting up the hollow and monitoring the surveillance, if you think you can spare the time from our collective one."

"I've got a few hours every day cleared off," Simon said. "Whenever Rover needs an extra hand at the crater pond, I'll be there, so while he's helping you I can be there instead. And I'll see if I can make the acquaintance of some of the Dusk Court and feel them out beforehand.

"Rover's got a point, too. If they're going to raid Circledell no matter what we do, we should help them win. That's about the only chance to answer the concern of this coming back on the Duchy. We want them to wipe out Circledell and leave not a single survivor, then burn the place to the ground."

"I think that's a bad idea," Mizuko signed.

"Really?" Simon asked. Mizuko probably knew more about killing people than he did. "The burning part was kind of metaphorical, but leaving witnesses, or even much evidence of what happened, seems dangerous to me. What would you do?"

"The King and Queens have agreed on one thing: we are at war with the Goblin King. At least, for now that's what they've decided," Mizuko signed. "If you take the war to the fae people of the Hedge, then you are forcing the Duchy to declare war on them, too. Simon, we are at war. Do you really think the Goblin King might believe it was anyone but us who took out his people?"

"Really? No," Simon said. "But if there's any chance, it comes from leaving no witnesses. My personal opinion is that Circledell is a sickness that should be scourged from the Hedge, but we can't do it without endangering the Duchy.

"If the Dusk court is going to do it anyway, and if we're going to help, then the best we can do is damage control."

Mizuko looked at Less.

Less was a bit surprised at Mizuko's change of opinion, but she was mercurial at the best of times. "Let me clarify one thing. Do you mean it would be a bad idea to wipe out the current *civilian* Cirledell residents because it would expand the war from the Goblin King to the entire Hedge, or a bad idea to attack Cirledell at all because it would reignite the war?"

Mizuko shrugged. "I am for killing any minions loyal to the Goblin King and thereby taking revenge for what they did to Legate Longinus Fray, as I stated months ago. Simon has stated one position which includes the slaughter of any who may see us engage in war with the Goblin King, which appears to align with his personal feelings on the matter. I'm saying that I disagree that this action would in any way conceal our involvement. I'm stating only the obvious; if we kill fae not involved in the war then we are forcing the Duchy into a broader conflict. There will be consequences for that, though I cannot say if they might be very minor or very severe."

The nymph slowly turned her head toward each member of the motley. "Listen. I understand your ethics were offended by the fact that scavengers moved in and took Cirledell after it was weakened by the Goblin King's attack on Longinus. But do not forget the former residents were also fae. They would not care about your ethics, or you for that matter, unless it was in their own best interest to do so. That said, you do not have to agree with me. I will comply with whatever course of action the motley, or in this case, Less decides is best."

"Those scavengers will be moving on soon anyway," Rey added. "There's little to no food left for them, and getting more is a big problem."

"So we're really dealing with three different groups inside of Cirledell, right?" Rover called for clarification.

"There's the garrison itself which houses the Goblin King's troops, though we don't know exactly how many or how well they're armed. There's the slavers who will likely support the garrison since they depend on the troops for protection. Then we have the slaves who will likely be forced to support their masters? I have to admit, I don't fully understand the magics that have them bonded or what the terms are, but do I at least have the politics of the place straight?"

"I think 'slavers' implies too much organization. The creatures seemed more opportunistic to me, using the sprites as slaves until they ate them." said Less carefully. "We can still carry out my plan except Rover can't help with weapons of mass destruction and Simon should try to steer the Dusk Court into targetting only the Goblin King's minions. Either that, or we limit our contact with the Dusk Court to me offering them the use of my hollow to mount their attack. What are everyone's thoughts on that?"

"Well, hold on. Back up." Added Rover. "I'm still trying to figure out who we're actually trying to kill here. If the slavers, whether they're organized or not, are going to be leaving soon because of a lack of food, then what's keeping the garrison there? Are we about to lose our military target as well as the opportunists?"

Mizuko nodded. It was a reasonable question. "Less," she signed, "has Dusk been watching them since June? Or your people? Do we have anything current?"

"As far as I know, the Dusk Court doesn't have any knowledge of Cirledell beyond what I presented in my report. I've gone back a few times over the summer, and so has the Wretched Doorward. Things seem to be pretty much as we left it. The sprites are good at hiding so, while being more than decimated, they still have a presence and still get caught. I guess it's enough. I don't know why the Goblin King maintains the garrison there. I doubt very much that it has anything to do with the sprites or their tormentors. Maybe he's just keeping an eye on my Door."

"Combat units don't usually stay anyplace where they're starving to death." Rover considered. "I'm guessing they have their own supply lines, but I have no idea how that could be getting past the slavers. It doesn't really matter. If the food situation is that bad for the civilians then we can use that. Either to convince them to leave for better regions or get them to turn on the garrison in exchange for handing over the larder.

"The second bit would be ideal. Slavers are greedy, and if we can get them to organize and execute their own raids then we could cover up our involvement with their violence."

Rover shrugged at the guesswork that he, himself, was making.

"But that's strategy level planning. We can't start doing that without more information. I'm just trying to get a better handle on our goals. It seems like we want to kill the Goblin King's soldiers and remove Circledell as one of his assets without implicating the Dusk and, by extension, the Duchy. Civilian casualties are fine just so long as nobody with official ties to any court is seen being involved. Do I have that about right?"

Like Rover, Mizuko was also uncertain. She looked to Less for guidance, and Simon and Rey for their opinions.

"I don't personally have any loyalty to the Dusk Court," said Less. "They are a fringe element in the Duchy at the moment and if they are blamed for attacking the Goblin King's people I'm sure the other courts would be quick to throw them to the wolves to avoid a resurgence of hostilities. Rover, you are free to discuss the tactics of the raid with the Dusk Court especially if it convinces them not to attack the general population of Circledell, as long as you keep a low profile. We know that the current residents are willing to receive a certain amount of changeling contact and so convincing them to attack the garrison is not beyond the realm of possibility (granted, we are talking about the Hedge where the realm of possibility takes on a whole new meaning)."

"I don't know," Rey said, "the more I think about this, the more uncomfortable I'm becoming with it. When we talked to the owner of the shop, I got the distinct impression we were pushing our luck being in Circledell. It's going to be even more dangerous because we disappeared at the same time as the shuttle. I don't know if it would be too hard for him to put two and two together and come up with our faces." She looked at Rover. "I'm not sure where you got the idea there were slavers in Circledell. If there were, you'd think there'd be a better influx of workers and food. And then there's the invitation from the garrison commander whom we stood up.

"If you want us to be involved directly, Less, then I'll go, if only to act as interpreter for Mizuko," Rey finished.

Rover shrugged off the semantics of the hour.

"It sounds like most of the original fae who were caught and not killed immediately were kept to provide labor, demeaning services and dinner. The new hob-kin might not be holding auctions or signing up for "Slavery Today" newsletters, but it sounds to me like they've very definitely established a slave state. I never meant to suggest that they belonged to an organized company, but a slaver is as a slaver does. The word 'opportunist' does not seem to justly carry the revulsion I feel for these guys."

"I do *not* want the motley directly involved," said Less. "This is the Dusk Court's operation and I am getting involved simply to learn more about them. If Rover wants to give them the option of turning the population of Circledell against the garrison, they can decide that between themselves. I agree that it would be a risk to expect Circledell to trust a changeling but the planners in the Dusk Court would have to decide whether or not to take that risk."

"You don't incite a riot through trust." Rover corrected. "We have some genuinely horrid conditions going on

in there. We also have some very greedy bastards. If Dusk can slip some people in and stir up unrest, maybe get the more ambitious and influential citizens pointed in the right directions, then there's a good chance a real uprising will take over from there. That'll cover a lot of tracks in case direct action ends up being applied for maximum effect.

"But if you want me to keep my nose clean, then fine. I'll stay away from the town and just work with the real planners of this mess. It won't be as satisfying, but it'll be safer. And I've never had any real problems with 'safer'."

"I'm still inclined to just try to talk to the Dusk Court," Simon said, mostly toward Less. "How would you feel if I just spent some time trying to get to know them? I can be careful to keep from tipping them off. And all this has made me think of something else. I wasn't paying enough attention to Court when the Glacial Axe presented themselves to the Crowns. The Regents agreed to let them stay here, so I wonder what they had in mind. I may poke around a little and see what I can find out about that."

"Yes, that's a good idea," agreed Less. "You could bring Mizuko with you and use your knowledge of Circledell as a reason to start up the conversation."

"Works for me," Simon said, then turned to Mizuko. "You up for that?"

She nodded and signed, "It should be interesting."

"Can you set up an introduction to Richard and Claire? We can use the back stage lounge at Glasshouse if that's their kind of place, or I'll arrange whatever they'd be most comfortable with," Simon said. Beyond just trying to gather information for Less, Simon genuinely wanted to meet the leaders of the Glacial Axe. He was perhaps a bit more optimistic than Less, even though he recognized the Winter fey's concerns, and hoped that the new Court's leaders might turn out to be worth befriending.

"I'll ask them their preference," she signed. "I'm sure they will speak with me."

"Great," Simon said. "So that's pretty well settled? Everybody have a decent idea what they're supposed to be doing? Because when we're ready, I think there are a couple other things we should talk about while we're all together."

As Mizuko watched Simon curiously, she crossed her legs and pressed her shoulderblades against the cupboards for support.

Captivated by the motion of Mizuko's bare legs and torso, Simon was only mostly joking when he said "um... What was I talking about?"

"Hormones." Rover quipped. "As for a decent idea of what I'm supposed to be doing, I'm pretty sure that I'm supposed to be keeping tabs on Dusk while I help them to not do anything stupid. If I can plant some bugs for Less' network, then I'll give it a shot. It should help if I can use something electronic. I doubt they have much experience with actual technology.

"I'll have to meet them on more than just neutral territory in order to get anything worth while, though. Getting access to their war-room or even just a safe house would be ideal. Other than that, if I can actually orchestrate an effective move against the Circledell garrison then I'm going for it. I just have to make sure that it doesn't come back to bite either us or the Duchy in the back.

"Do I have that about right?"

"I think so," Rey confirmed. "I will be accompanying Mizuko when she goes to talk to the leaders of the Glacial Axe, ostensibly to act as interpreter. I'll watch their reactions, and try to get a feel of them as a



whole."

Mizuko smiled her appreciation at Rey. Sometimes, she thought, it was like Rey read her mind. There were times when use of her voice might be seen as coercion and she was not yet the Legate of Mists to be impressing the will Autumn on this matter. Sign language was not well known and even her own motley mates could communicate only in the short-hand of Glymjack Sign when she wished to be silent.

"Good," said Less. "I'll get the Hollow ready for their use."

"Okay," Simon said. "Then it's time for item 2. We need to work out how we're going to get the work done on the Hollow. I've got a couple hours a day set aside so Rover will have an extra pair of hands. If everyone else can do the same thing, even just a day or two a week, we'll be able to get the major work done pretty fast. And maybe we can try to clear off another work day where nobody gets shot and poisoned to screw up the schedule." He smiled toward Mizuko. "If you really didn't want to help, you could have just faked a back injury, you know."

Less nodded, "As I said, I need to prep the Circledell Hollow for a little while but I'll make sure to set aside some time to craft a few doors afterwards."

Rey tried her best not to shoot Simon a dirty look. "I don't know how much time I can spare right now," she said, with no trace of her anger in her voice. "There's not much free time in my schedule right now. However, I want to show all of you the results of one of the things I've worked on. It's a backdoor, I guess, an emergency exit for the rest of you. It leads to my own little hollow from a path in the Hedge near here. There is a door from there out into the material world, but I really don't recommend you use it except in a dire emergency. Where you end up isn't exactly a welcoming place." She had no desire to expand on her statement, but they've been warned and were at their own risk if they went through the material world Door from her hollow without her.

"I have been doing what I can," she signed at Simon, "but understand that my queen has recommended I should minimize my time in the Hedge and focus more on time spent in the mortal world. She says it should help restore my ability to shut out the voices and small creatures I glimpse all the time."

Rey's eyes shot to her friend's, a highly concerned look on her face. "Why didn't you say anything before?" she signed in dismay, her fingers moving almost too quickly for the men to understand. "What can I do to help?"

That was worrying, Simon thought, but at least it meant she'd talked to Veridia. "We'll get by," he said. "I knew you'd be busy, Rey. Whenever you can clear some time off, there will be work for you to do. Rover's like a stuff-building machine when he gets going. The only problem is he's a short, surly stuff-building machine." Simon smiled to show he was joking. "I've been thinking of talking to a couple people to learn how to keep up with him. If that pans out, we'll get the basic construction done really fast and just need some help with the finishing work. Do you think you'd have time to order parts and stuff for us?"

He didn't quite know what to say to Mizuko, but he was thinking about it.

Mizuko was watching Rey's hands while Simon spoke and answered. "I shouldn't have said that," she signed. "I hadn't been saying anything because I was afraid you'd think me mad, but I'm not. I've only grown more powerful. But still, it's distracting for that to happen and Veridia says that time and effort in the mortal world will help me shut that out again."

"There's a difference between mad, and losing the ability to block out the effects of the Hedge and Arcadia on our mind," Rey signed rapidly again. "I'll do what I can to help you." Rey was a tiny bit offended that Mizuko hadn't said anything to her before. Of course she'd help Mizuko. She'd help any member of the motley who needed it.

"I know Rey," Mizuko signed. "But I'm not broken. I wanted to show Veridia I can do this." She paused and looked away for just a moment, reconsidering her words. "But I guess it wouldn't hurt to get away and just try to act like a normal mortal sometime. I've thought of a hundred different things to do, but I'm not sure any of them are 'normal' or not. Maybe I mentioned it because I could use some suggestions." The odd thing was she meant that seriously; she really didn't know exactly why she mentioned it all now.

A chill went up Less' spine when he realized Mizuko was still suffering from visions. Her comment that it was only her growing power made the bottom of his stomach fall out. Power without the clarity to tell the difference between reality and fantasy was not a comforting thing - something that brought the spectre of the True Fae. He decided not to say anything at the moment, but his eyes found Rey's and they shared a meaningful look. This was a priority that needed to be dealt with - and he would do all he could to help.

"What do you have in mind," Simon asked. "Normal mortals do a lot of weird stuff, so there's plenty to choose from." He wanted to get Mizuko's own input before anybody started making suggestions. To Simon's mind, Mizuko *wasn't* weak, or broken, or to be pitied. She was perfectly capable of making her own decisions. She just needed someone to give her a nudge in the right direction, and to catch her if she fell.

And everybody needed that sometimes.

"The last thing I thought of I actually tried, but didn't work out well," she signed. "I thought it would be interesting to go to the grocery store and find a recipe on the back of one of the food items and try it. But when I'm not looking, the vegetables complain so loudly and the sliced mushrooms looked so tortured. The meat just looked... gory. I think I made a scene. I haven't been back. Plus, I will never eat chicken noodle casserole again."

Rey blinked, disturbed at what Mizuko had just described. "Don't worry, Miz," she signed. "I'm sure we can figure something out."

"So... It would be good if you only had to focus on one thing at a time, and didn't have to deal with too many people for a while," Simon mused. "Are you free at lunchtime for an hour or so?"

"This is my lunch time," she pointed out.

"I meant in general," Simon said with a little chuckle. He'd walked into that one. "I thought we might go have lunch together sometimes and do some people-watching. I've been meaning to survey all the family-owned restaurants in town. It'd be more fun with company. We can skip the places that do chicken noodle casserole."

"I think she needs more interaction," Rey said, "not simply observation. There's a couple of things I've got in mind." She looked at Less, Rover and Simon. "Girls' nights."

Mizuko looked between Simon and Rey. "I would not mind doing both," she signed. "Rey, you already know what nights I have open, and if something comes up for the Court I'll say so. Simon, my lunches can be irregular depending on how my day is going. I'm flexible unless it's not a good day. I have a phone now, so just call me." She looked at Less for a moment and frowned. "You are quiet, Less. You looked at me and now you are trying not to. Did I do something wrong?"

"It's nothing, Mizuko. I'm just worried about you is all. Just make sure you find the time to relax with Rey and Simon."

She nodded once to let him know she would.

"All that kind of fits with what I was going to ask next, in a way," Simon said. "Rover poised this question

when we first met, but there were other priorities and we've never answered it. So what do you all think the Glymjack Motley does? I have a couple suggestions, but I don't think we really need to make a decision right now. In fact, I'd rather we all talk about it a little then take a day or two to think over what everyone else said and come back to it."

"Our pledge, which we have renewed every twenty eight days," Mizuko signed, "stipulates exactly what is expected. We have pledged aid to each other, even unto torture and death and nothing shall break this promise we have made — not even death. In return for what we have promised each other we have reaped blessings." She may have missed his point, but she did very well understand the mechanics of the motley pledge.

"But what are we going to aid each other to *do*?" Simon asked. "So far, the answer has been pretty disorganized, and that might be okay. I don't want to force some kind of organization down everybody's throat. That'd be dumb, and not much fun. But there are other Motleys, and other groups of people in general, who have defined goals. I knew a group in Roanoke who got together to defend the Changelings in the city from non-Changeling threats. They had a big problem with vampires for a while. I hung with another group for a little while who wanted to open a strip club. I helped them get started, but I decided to come home and never joined their Motley. Maybe we want to work toward some goal together.

He shifted in his seat to more easily look at everyone. "There are two ideas that I really like. The first one is that every so often, maybe every time we get together to renew the pledge, we all talk about something we'd like to do for the next moon. Maybe one of us needs help with a personal project, or maybe we just pick something cool to do. Then everybody contributes whatever they can. That's not really any different than what we're doing now except being a little more deliberate about it.

"The other one is that we hang out a shingle. We were brought together by Fate, and probably for some reason. Twice now, we've showed that we can bring a lot of knowledge, skill, and power to bear on a problem in a very short timeframe. So far, we've done it just for ourselves. But other people might be able to use our help. Some of them may have no place else to turn, and some of them might have quite a bit to offer us in return. We absolutely shouldn't take any job offered from anyone, but if we pick our causes and our rewards well, we can be a power in the Duchy that makes the whole Duchy stronger, safer, and better.

Returning to a comfortable position, Simon shrugged. "Or not. I don't think it's what we *have* to do, and there are good reasons not to, but it's worth thinking about."

Rover had been squirming a fair amount during this part of the discussion. There was something boiling within him that he needed to talk about, but it was so personal that he simply had trouble finding the courage. The little gnome had always been slow to trust others. He supposed that that the motley was as close as he was going to get, at least in this lifetime.

"Back when I was first 'taken', I was forced to work on torture machines." Rover stepped into the conversation with a non-sequitur. "I'm not going into details, but the things I invented and maintained caused a lot of innocent people a lot of pain. I vowed that nothing I created ever again would be used to hurt anyone.

"But, a little while back, my workshop was raided and some very dangerous items were taken. I'm pretty sure it was the Goblin King's forces. I'm also pretty sure that he's breaking my vow with those items. Someone with enough creativity could use them in devastating ways, I know."

The little gnome's face never seemed quite as old as now, while he spoke. The lines and cracks of his stony hide deepened with the shadows of his turmoil.

"I want them back. I want them out of the hands of evil and I want to make the bastards who took them pay. For every hair on every head that they hurt with my creations, I want retribution."

Rover had been having problems meeting the gazes of the others as he talked. Now, however, he lifted his sunken eyes and there was a pleading within that he barred from his voice.

"But I can't do it alone."

Mizuko looked at her friend and saw there was a lot of hurt there. The misuse of his inventions didn't just hurt the victims; it hurt him too. She understood that this wasn't just a request for aid. He needed the motley to help.

"I will help," Mizuko signed silently. "I will ask all the other sorceresses and witches of Autumn to watch for machines used to harm people." She knew the odds of them finding something when her people didn't know what they were really looking for were not good, but she offered up another possible lead. "If we take part in an attack on the Circledell garrison, then we may be able to discover from prisoners where the Goblin King might have such things. If he's taken them to Arcadia, then we will not be able to recover them. but if they are employed in the Hedge or even here, we may be able to find them."

"In the meantime, get me descriptions and I can ask around at the Goblin Market. There are merchants who specialize in that kind of stuff," Simon said. If he'd known, he would have started looking weeks ago. So now he was glad the Motley had taken time to share their concerns and interests. "I can't promise anything, either, but the hobs in the Market know all kinds of stuff."

Rover was grateful for the help offered so far and had a good suggestion as to where they could start.

"There's a reason why I keep thinking they have one at the garrison." He said. "I called it The Staff of Mana. It can provide food for an entire army if used properly, so if the troops there are well fed while the scavengers are starving then that might be why. It's meant to be used in a large, furrowed field, but they could have it planted in a small courtyard garden."

He shrugged, not really having any more clues to go on other than rumors and conjecture.

"I didn't intentionally build anything to be inherently destructive. So if Autumn tries to keep their eyes out for weapons they're not going to find anything. I'll give you as much detail as I can about them all, but some of them are going to be very, very subtle in how they're used."

Mizuko nodded once in thanks. "I will relay whatever you can give me."

"I will also make sure the Wardens of the Bleak Seal are on the lookout for information about your items," promised Less.

Rey, not wanting to cause Rover any more doubt, kept to herself a reminder that the scavengers were cannibals, and that's likely why they were starving.