

The sun had barely begun to rise above the horizon when Rey stepped through the door of the hotel where she was housing her working girls. The two courtesans had been dealt with earlier, charges to room service billed against their earnings on a weekly basis. The accounting required for the regular girls was a bit different. She'd collect the proceeds from Mizuko, check to see how things were going, and then take care of any other business.

It was the end of a long night for her. She'd been working the graveyard shift for the past couple days as the night manager had need time off for a family emergency. Rey was looking forward to going to bed and sleeping until sundown.

After a short ride up the elevator, the old 'vator clanked to a stop. It had one of those folding iron doors that you had to shove aside yourself, rather than wait for an automatic opener. Once free of the elevator, she saw a well-dressed young woman waiting for her holding a small metal box by a handle.

It was still hard to get used to seeing Mizuko dressed professionally. It was so very different from the nymph that Rey met only a few months ago. Today she was dressed in a light blue blouse and a tight but professional grey skirt. She wore just enough makeup to look like she wasn't wearing any. This outfit, Rey knew, was one that Amber had picked for her which is why Mizuko hadn't looked immediately familiar.

Mizuko didn't say anything, but simply offered Rey the metal box. Rey would want to review it, of course, so they walked over to a lounge positioned at the end of the hall. It had windows overlooking the street and shared no walls with any of the rooms in the old hotel. Mizuko shut the door behind them and moved to look out the window while Rey attended to business.

After setting the box down on one of the small tables, she asked Mizuko "How are things this week? Any problems?"

Mizuko shook her head, then turned to face Rey. She signed, "Unless you count nearly dying of an infection at the Hollow." She smiled, but then continued. "No the girls are fine. No issues. The cops haven't bothered us. I get propositioned daily. The usual."

"I know the girls don't often go that far," Rey signed in return, "but keep them away from McGready? Street. I heard vice is going to be doing sweeps there for the next week or so, and we don't want to have to deal with that."

Mizuko nodded. Then she signed, "Business is slowing down. Has been for the past couple weeks and I'm not sure why. Ideas?"

"Unless it's competition we aren't aware of, I'm not sure. Though, it might be the Axe Gang." Rey paused. "I think, though, they're more likely to take a direct approach than something like this. None of the girls have been skimming, or trying to freelance?"

Mizuko shook her head. She chewed her lip but hesitated to say what she was thinking.

"You know I won't bite unless you ask very nicely, Mizuko," Rey said. "Tell me what you think might be going on."

Mizuko smiled just a little bit at Rey's remark. She had a very pretty smile, but she didn't do it very much. Because of that, her extraordinary beauty came off somewhat cold and aloof to those who didn't know her.

She signed, "I think that the loss of the two prettiest and most intelligent girls have cause some customers to go elsewhere. Some came to see them, and if they couldn't they'd settle for someone else. But since they are here at all... well. Some of these girls aren't all that... I guess what I'm saying is that some do or used to do drugs and are more than a little fried. It shows. Others just aren't the most attractive people in the world. This

job has an affect on some. They know their bodies are worth a certain price. That's it. If we want to do better business we need more and more attractive merchandise."

Rey nodded. "I kind of expected that to happen, but hoped it wouldn't. We need to increase the stable. I don't want to be luring girls from the bus station, though. I'd prefer to find ones that are already in the business, or are likely to be headed that way anyway. Can you and Amber take care of that, or do I need to put some of my other resources on it?"

Mizuko replied in sign again. "We can, it's just..."

"What? Not something you want to do?" Rey asked easily. It was(n't?) something everyone wanted to do. Rey doubted she'd have gotten involved in the business at all if the opportunity hadn't presented itself the way it did.

She shook her head. "Not that exactly," she signed. "It's more like it feels... odd. To ask a mortal to do something I wouldn't do. Don't worry about it. It won't be a problem.

"Although I did have an idea."

"Please share." Rey replied with a smile.

"What about changelings? Plenty of them like to feed on emotions. Or maybe even other kinds of supernaturals that would find that life... convenient." Of course, Mizuko was thinking of Spring Court changelings specifically. The other courts tended to think of them as hedonistic partiers.

"That might work," Rey said, "though I will have to insist no vampires." She worked hard to keep the hatred off her face. "I'm not sure how the Emerald Queen might enjoy her people working for a member of Autumn. That could be a good way to go, though. Do you know who to approach in the Duchy?" Using Changelings would have several benefits, not the least of which would be providing a measure of protection to those who are in the sex trade and would otherwise be at the mercy of mortal pimps - or worse.

"Not yet," Mizuko signed. "But if I have a go on this, I'll find out."

Rey nodded. "Go ahead. Keep me updated on your progress and any roadblocks you might be encountering."

Mizuko nodded and turned back to the window while Rey finished the accounting. After Rey finished, she was still staring down at something outside.

"What's up?" Rey asked her as she transferred the money and papers into her briefcase. "Those wannabe rappers on the corner aren't doing anything stupid to my car, are they?"

Mizuko turned part way toward her but kept her eyes on the street. She signed, "There is a strange woman down there. I don't think she's a client and Mandy is about to find that out the hard way." Mizuko sighed. "And there it is. Maybe the stranger's punch to her nose will fix it."

Mizuko then strode swiftly out of the room. Whether she personally liked Broken Nose or not, it was still her job to protect the girl. She picked up speed and bypassed the elevator, choosing to leap down the stairs faster than the old 'vator could move.

Rey followed Mizuko down the stairs, though not as quickly as her friend had descended them. It was Mizuko's job to protect the girls, but Rey wanted to be on-hand if help was needed.

When Mizuko got to the front doors after leaving the stairwell, she slowed, then stepped outside. She closed

the door carefully behind herself, though there was a glass window if Rey wanted to watch.

Mizuko went over to Mandy and checked her. The broken-nosed hooker sported a shiner and looked furious, but cowed. The nymph then stood up and turned on the stranger.

The woman was a thin, slip of a girl. Plain, and very cool of demeanor, she regarded Mizuko in kind with half-closed grey eyes. She wore worn jeans and a tee cutoff midriff. Mizuko approached her and stopped only a few feet away. Rey saw her friend was in easy striking distance of the stranger, but the woman didn't seem particularly worried.

Mizuko was a very attractive woman, but she could be so cold and menacing when she wanted to be. Much moreso than Rey. But the stranger didn't back down or leave.

"I'm here to see Rey Lafitte. I have a message for her."

Mizuko held out her hand.

"You don't talk much, do you?"

Mizuko just looked at her steadily. Mandy stood up and tried to help, in her own bumbling way. "She doesn't talk. But she can kick your ass."

The nymph held up her hand to Mandy and she stopped talking. Then Mizuko stood and folded her arms and waited.

The stranger got it. "My name's Frost. I'm sorry I hit your... ah, your friend. She got pushy and I'm not here for that. Just give Rey this for me, okay?" She held out an envelope and Mizuko took it.

Rey continued to watch from where she stood, wondering who wanted to contact her. It would have taken some work to link her to the hotel and what was going on there, unless Frost had followed her.

Mizuko watched until Frost was gone, then turned and checked Mandy again. She made an irritated sound, then took Mandy's purse, opened it and dug around a bit. She found some makeup and carefully applied it to blend away the developing bruise. She worked at it a while but finally was satisfied and put it away. Mandy thanked her briefly and Mizuko patted her on the back, then turned and went back inside.

Mizuko found Rey where she'd been watching them, and then gave her the envelope.

"Thanks." Rey glanced at the outside for a moment before slitting it open. She immediately recognized Lyla's handwriting, with the time and location of the Full Moon Meet that night. There was also a reminder to be early, as there were some things Lyla needed to go over with Rey before the Hunt got started.

"Shit," Rey muttered. "I'd completely forgotten about this." It was a good thing Kelsie McKenna, the assistant night manager, had offered to run tomorrow night's shift. Rey wasn't completely satisfied with the current night manager, but wanted to know if Kelsie could handle the show by herself.

When Lyla had extended the invitation, Rey was both pleased and excited. She'd never participated in anything like that, and it would let her learn more about the Uratha in and around Santa Fe. She'd be sure to wear her ring, the gift from the Storm Front pack. It was a definite honor to receive such a thing.

There was no mention of what the quarry was, though Rey suspected it was being left as a surprise to all participants. Now that she'd thought about it more, she realized she was still looking forward to the event.

The meet was held at a large warehouse at the western edge of town. At a good three stories tall and measuring hundreds of feet on a side, the warehouse had not only space required to run, the offices there sported enough room for the entire Storm Front pack as well as their several allied packs to gather.

The warehouse had been a distribution center for machine parts headed to factories. As factories shut down and moved out of country, however, warehouses supporting them became casualties along with thousands of workers. This warehouse was purchased complete with huge crates still housing machinery meant for a variety of uses, but that wasn't worth scrap metal anymore. Old forklifts and freight elevators dotted the warehouse floor and a maze of stacked crates rose high enough to block line of site.

Rey found herself in casual company. Werewolves here were all in human form, dressed in a variety of clothing from jeans and shirts to business suits, and even club wear. There didn't seem to be a dress code and a few guests appeared to have arrived directly from their day jobs, whatever they might be.

As she made her way to Lyla and Chaska, she smiled and nodded to Kim and Zeke. When she saw Frost, she nodded to her as well. Near her friends were a pair of young - or young looking - men. Both were tall and muscular and were obviously related, though their coloring couldn't have been more different. The one with jet black hair continued to talk to Chaska as Rey approached, but the one whose hair was such a pale blonde it was almost white watched her with curiosity.

Rey smiled at him as she looked him over as he had done with her. She knew what he saw, and thought again how well her Mask hid the dangerous side of her nature, for she had no idea what the people here would have thought if they saw her as she truly was. They'd see soon enough that she was more than "just" human, though she doubted they'd ever know exactly how much more she was.

The blonde was definitely good looking, though not in a drop dead way. His dress was business casual, with the shirt clinging to his body though the way he held himself she knew he wasn't trying to impress anyone - it was just the way he was.

When Rey was close, Lyla caught her eyes and smiled, though she didn't interrupt Chaska. The changeling came to stop just outside the group and waited to be addressed.

Chaska was saying, "So the goal is to catch the fox any way you can. In the case more than one person might be involved in the capture of the fox, judges will determine the winner. The winner will have their choice of one of two prizes. At the winners option, he or she may select one mate for the night. The choice of mate must be a participant, or a wolfblood whose patron is a participant. Or, the winner may choose the prize in this sack."

The Boneshadow alpha held up a burlap sack. Nothing could be determined of it, other than a few odd lumps. "This prize contains a fetish I made and bound personally. I have excluded myself as a participant and will remain as a judge."

"Does the fox need to be alive or dead at the end?" Rey asked, her accent seeming to her to be more seductive than usual.

"Either way is good," Lyla interjected. "Just try not to eat it. We need some evidence it was caught."

Rey chuckled. "No need to worry about that on my part. If I won and choose the fetish, you'll make sure I can use it?" She wondered if that might get the attention of the two strangers.

"Nope, sorry." Lyla shook her head. "That would make it less useful to the rest of us. But, you could trade it for something." She winked.

There was a murmur among some of the other wolves present as they debated which prize was better. In the old days, no wolf would consider mating with another werewolf. The elder werewolves had long made a tradition of warning that such a union would produce something called a Ghostwolf. This creature was a fell spirit who existed only to destroy werewolves — starting with its parents. Any werewolf who broke this law was often killed by the elders or banished as punishment for breaking their laws.

However, the younger packs, specifically the packs led by Stormfront, thought otherwise. Lyla and Chaska brought "heretical" information in that the lie spread by the elders had simply been a tool they used to keep control over younger wolves and maintain their grip on the packs.

Storm Front didn't dispute the existence of Ghostwolf spirits, however. They only disputed their origin. Thus far, they have not been proven wrong, and their position on werewolf to werewolf mating had been proving very popular with younger packs while at the same time proving to be a point of major contention with older packs. In the Mythic area, however, all the packs that had survived the war with the Pure and subsequent Silver Crusade were young.

One unexpected complication of the rejection of the ancient law was one perhaps foreseen by the elders. Werewolf pairs tended to very quickly become a power block that could be much more powerful than the leadership, a single pack alpha, could muster. Thus control over individual packs could be much more tenuous. To solidify power within a pack then, it became very quickly obvious that alphas needed to quickly choose a mate. Their combined power could keep rogue elements in check and stave off potential mutinies far better.

The prize most werewolves might seek this night, that of being able to choose any other participating werewolf or their wolfblood charges as a mate was a way of countering the tendency to form small cliques and power groups within packs. Participating in the hunt meant that the werewolf was willing to share something that wasn't normally available and that tended to at least temporarily take down social barriers.

Lyla, the mate to Storm Front's alpha, was always for breaking down social barriers. Her influence was easily seen in the presentation of this prize. Chaska's influence was present in the choice to opt-out of a sex-based choice in favor of a simple, practical kind of trophy. He was a highly talented Boneshadow ritualist and of all the werewolves present, the one most capable of creating a useful and valuable fetch.

"I suppose," Rey said with a sigh of mock defeat, then her smile returned to her face. "Are you going to introduce me around, or am I to remain a mystery?"

Lyla nodded and smiled. "Everyone, this is Rey. She is not Uratha or wolfblood, but she is a wolf shifter. She is an ally of the Stormfront Pack and handles important city business for us. She is to be treated like any other werewolf here."

Dozens of eyes turned toward Rey, some evaluating others curious. She smiled at everyone politely as she scanned the room looking for faces she recognized, and trying to remember as many as she could for future reference.

She shifted her gaze to the two unknown men next to her. "What name should I call you?" she asked, knowing their answers could give her an idea of their personality.

The blonde one said, "Steve. Nice to meet you, Rey." He stuck out his hand and they shook.

The dark-haired one put in, "Robert." He shook hands, too. "So another kind of shifter, eh? Are you a witch or shaman or something?"

"Or something," Rey replied. "I have only a normal wolf form, however. Nothing so grand as as your Urshul

or Dalu forms." She glanced at Lyla, her eyes sparkling with amusement and mischief. Her friend had seen her wolf form and knew how normal a wolf the size of a grown man was.

The blonde watched her and sniffed the air around her. The other continued to speak though he looked amused. "Well I suppose we'll see just what you are soon enough."

"Very true," Rey replied, ignoring Steve's actions for now. "Which pack are you a part of?" Given the number of werewolves who had died during the war, she suspect most of the packs in and around Mythic and Santa Fe had been decimated or even wiped out. There were a large number of Uratha here, so it was hard to say.

Getting information about the werewolves was high on her list. It was her hope to offer to act as liason between the Duchy and the Storm Front pack, and any others in the area if she could manage it. Having been declared an ally of the Storm Front pack meant she was to be trusted - at least as much as they would trust someone not of their pack. It also might make her a prime candidate as the evening's prize, should someone wish to claim her for the night.

Still, Rey had no idea if any of them might consider her. That made her realize there was another question she needed to ask Lyla: what exactly would be expected of a "mate for the night" other than sex.

The werewolf looked at her as he weighed what that information might give her. He still didn't know a thing about her other than that she wasn't a werewolf and that the Alpha of the Storm Front pack's mate had announced her as an ally.

"I don't know you yet, Rey." He smiled politely. "Seems like you're the newcomer here. What pack are *you* from?" His eyes flickered with amusement. "Or are you rogue?"

"I do have a pack," she replied easily, "though we don't call it that, and we call ourselves the Glymjacks. And while I may be new to Santa Fe, Chaska, Lyla and I have been friends for a long time." Rey didn't see the harm in giving him the name; she didn't think it would do much good. It wasn't as if the motley was spreading it around.

Steve's polite smile warmed. "You, Chasks and Lyla? From before the troubles, then. I understand. You're old friends." He nodded understanding. "I'm the alpha of the War Crows. We are Blood Talons, warriors. So it shouldn't come as a surprise when I win the prize tonight."

His friend snorted and rolled his eyes. "We'll see Steve."

Rey couldn't help but chuckle. "Have you given much thought to which prize you'll take if you win?"

He looked over in the direction of Chaska and his mate. Lyla stood there, her attention on three young werewolves, two male and one female, as they spoke to her about some concern or another. "I'd take her."

The reasons were obvious. For one, Lyla was stunningly attractive. She was the sort of person that just exuded a kind of sensual power. Also, she was the mate for the alpha of the most powerful pack of Uratha in the whole northern part of New Mexico. Getting to claim her, even for just a night, would be worth a lot of prestige.

Maybe too much. His friend said, "Not gonna happen boss. She's not in the running."

"What?" Steve looked irritated and disappointed. "That was the whole reason I came. Are you sure?"

His man shrugged. "'S what I overheard Zeke telling one of the other alphas. She's off limits."

Steve shook his head. "No way. That can't be true. Wasn't this thing her idea to begin with? And then she

would take herself out of the running in her own game?"

"Doesn't really surprise me," Rey replied with a shrug. She watched Lyla for a moment, then caught her friend's eye and hoped she'd understand Rey needed to talk to her when she was done. Turning her attention back to Steve, she asked "Are you still going to participate?"

He thought about it and then looked around the room. "Yes. My whole pack is going to do this thing and we'll bring the prey down as a pack. We've worked out how we want to handle who gets the prize when we win, though we might alter some things if the prize is different than expected."

"I see you've got a good plan," Rey said with a nod. "Good luck." She thought for a moment about her lost ability to manipulate chance, and fought back a frown. Now was not the time to lose herself in regrets over the past.

The "wolf shifter" made her goodbyes and worked her way back to Lyla, hoping to have a short, private word with her. As she waited, she listened. If she was to have any hope of winning, she'd have to work with another group. But who? The War Crows were unlikely, as they already had a plan in place, and unlikely to be willing to add someone in at such a late date. This meant she needed to learn more about the other Uratha here, and that meant mingling. To do that effectively, she'd need to learn more about what was going on.

Soon she saw Lyla break free of the three younger wolves and head to a corner. There was a refrigerator there, which she opened and dug around inside. She was still preoccupied with the contents of the fridge when Rey approached.

"Secret stash of snacks?" Rey asked with a grin.

Lyla leaned back, saw it was Rey and smiled. She turned and knocked the door closed with her heel, then leaned back on it. "Coke?" She offered one of the two cans she'd retrieved. It was caffeine free and diet. Rey remembered that the super-charged metabolisms that werewolves had meant that drugs had weird, intense or unexpected effects on them. Caffeine was no exception. A werewolf on caffeine was not a pretty sight.

"Do you have a minute? I need to ask you a couple of things, preferably in private."

"Sure hon." She looked at Rey a moment, as if guessing what this might be able. She winked. "This way." Lyla took a long drink and made it look like she was a model in a Coke commercial. Then she led the way out of the main office area into a loading dock complete with freight elevator. She closed the door behind them. "What's up?"

"I've got a couple of questions, and I didn't want anyone overhearing them. I'd rather feel a fool in private." Rey half-smiled. "This mate for the night thing, how does it work? Should I expect it to be any more than hours of sex?"

"With those bozos? I think you give them too much credit. Unless you are thinking you might play for your own team." Lyla grinned. "Consider it like a one night stand. If you win, you get to pick who you want, if that's your thing. Everyone who participates knows the rule and is a viable choice. If you decide you want more than a one night stand, that's up to you to figure out. Or you can say to hell with the whole thing and take Chaska's prize if you win. Or if someone else wins and that's what they want, then that's what they get." She shrugged. "I think most will go for Chaska's prize to avoid angering existing mates, honestly."

"Perhaps," Rey replied. "At least one guy here was planning on picking you as his prize if he won."

"I'm sure he was," she smiled.

"He was rather put out when he found out you weren't eligible. Why did you take yourself off the menu?"

"I didn't," she said. "That was my mate."

Rey smiled. "I suspected it was something along those lines."

"Why would you suspect that?" Lyla asked.

"I've never thought of Chaska as the sharing type, now that he has you," Rey replied. "And I've watched the two of you together, and in the short time I've had, the two of you seem really happy together. I doubt either of you would want to take the chance of a one night stand messing things up."

"It used to be I only let one man in my life tell me what I can and can't do. I'd fight tooth and nail if anyone else tried it, much to my previous pack's irritation. Ramiel's not in my life anymore, though I suspect if he did show up and wanted to sweep me away again it'd be damned hard to tell him no."

"I think Chaska knows this. I let him have some of the same leeway I gave Ramiel. I even let him tell me who I can't sleep with — which means everyone but him. At least for now. I do it for the pack. And for him. It reassures him a little, I think. So, I let him know I wasn't happy about not being able to run in my own game. Hell, I told him that if I ran in the game I'd probably win it anyway and then I'd just choose him so he had nothing to worry about." She laughed. "I guess he didn't buy it. He also had a point about us. He said we were supposed to be a mated pair, not out on the market. So, I hitched up my libido and swallowed my pride. I'm out of the running as a prize or as a winner. I'll be doing something a little more important while the game is on."

"Will you tell me what that is?" Rey asked.

"Sure. Just checking to see if you were still paying attention." Lyla laughed. "Part of this whole thing is meant to help the packs blow off steam in a little friendly competition. The Crusade was stressful and it nearly destroyed a lot of werewolves. I'm talking about their minds here. Having to fight our own kind is hard on us. Having to kill is worse. And there was a lot of killing. So, Chaska says there is still great imbalance, as he calls it. I call it wolves driven to the brink of insanity. We're all trying to recover and in my own way I'm trying to provide a focus, something for the single wolves, or the wolves who've lost mates, to look forward to."

"It also means there are going to be a lot of really violent wolves out there tonight looking to vent in pursuit of the prey. And when the game is over, they are going to want to celebrate just as hard as they worked to win. At least, Chaska thinks so. I think he's underestimating their resilience, but he's the boss, not me. So my job is to go out there and help keep watch. Redirect emotions if need be and head off violence if it goes too far."

"Look I know what I invited you to might be a lot more dangerous than it first looks. If you want to back out now, I completely understand. It's still a perfect opportunity for you to socialize with us because all the social masks will be off. It will just be us being exactly who we are out there, for better or worse."

"I can't heal like you can," Rey said, "and I don't have Hamilton anymore." A lump rose in her throat. "If something were to happen, more serious than simple broken bone or bruises, is there someone here who could heal me?"

She nodded. "Yes. Chaska can heal any of that stuff. If you don't mind a ritual and a big, wet, sloppy tongue running over your body. But anything serious happens, I'll be there. Or one of my security people will be."



"If you don't mind Chaska getting to know what I tas..." Rey paused, then changed what she was going to say. "If you're okay with Chaska healing me, then I'm okay with whatever it is he has to do."

"I'm going to run with the others. I know it's risky, but it's something I need to do. Sure, they'll likely understand, but I don't want to deal with the what ifs of not doing it. Being able to hold my own, or at least put up a good fight, will certainly score me some points." Rey smiled wryly.

"Is there anyone in specific I need to be aware of who could be a problem?"

"For you, or just in general?"

"Both," Rey replied immediately with a grin, "but for me in particular."

"Naw. You don't threaten anyone's position," Lyla assured her. "You're too new to have developed enemies. In general... well it might be simplest to just tell you to avoid any wolf that looks crazy-mad. You do that, stay out of their way, you'll be just fine. They won't come after you if you aren't in the way and aren't an enemy. Chaska and I will handle anyone who loses it like that. That's not your job, so don't even try to stare someone in that frame of mind down."

"My time away definitely taught me that. What do you think the chances are of me being picked as the prize if I'm not the winner?" Rey asked, trying to be nonchalant about it, but she was both thrilled and dreaded the chance. To be picked over a powerful fetish said something - the person picked was (or might be) more valuable to them than the fetish might be. But to be picked meant she'd be cheating on Grey, even though neither of them knew if there was any part of their previous relationship left. He hadn't taken it well when he discovered what the Rey living in her cabin really was. They'd tried to make it work, but he started withdrawing from her. While it felt like her heart was being torn in two, she couldn't blame him. She wasn't the person she was before, and the glimpse he'd had of her fae mien had startled him.

It was the breaking down of their relationship that helped her decide to leave Eldon Well and come to Mythic. Time apart would help them both. Maybe she really did belong here, with the Duchy. She'd have to go back at least once, do deal with her Fetch, but when she did, would she stay? Would there really be anything there for her? But that was a question for another day. Tonight, she was running with the werewolves of Santa Fe. What a potentially glorious night it could be.

Lyla looked at Rey critically for a moment. "Hm. Fair to middling? You're attractive and different. A lot of wolfbloods who might otherwise be safe choices for a werewolf looking for a mate were killed in the Crusade. Female werewolves were more often captured and... converted. Males tended to be a bit less tractable I guess you'd say." Lyla shrugged. "Anyway there aren't so many female werewolves. It's leading to more stress in the packs. Especially since most of those who are left, have chosen mates. You might be a safer choice than any of the mated wolves for sure."

"Fair to middling? I don't know if I should be insulted or relieved." Rey chuckled. "Well, we'll have to see how things turn out. Thanks for the drink." She cracked it open but didn't take a sip. "I probably ought to get back and scope out the competition, and possibly find someone to team up with. I don't think I can win this alone."

"Hey, don't forget you are also competing against Chaska's prize," Lyla smiled. "And finding a teammate isn't a bad idea. It's always nice to have someone watching your back."

"I'd like to think that there's someone who might think a night with me is worth more than the fetish," Rey shook her head in mock dismay, though she knew what Lyla was getting at. "It's going to be difficult, I think, to find a teammate, being the outsider that I am. Still, Steve warmed up considerably when I told him you Chaska and I were friends before you arrived here." She laughed. "Here I am talking about winning. While it

would be nice, being able to hold my own with the survivors of the Crusade will let me hold my head high."

"Hey," Lyla said before Rey left. "Why don't you ask to join up with someone from my pack?"

"Who's running tonight?" Rey asked. For some reason, she thought most of the pack might be working security.

She counted off on fingers. "Zeke, Frost, Morrison, Truman, Stan, Derek, and Bloodtooth. Kim's out of the running because she's on security detail with me and Chaska. She's too young anyway."

Rey was surprised at the size of Lyla's pack. It meant a minimum of ten members, of whom she's met five. "I know Zeke and I've seen Frost." Rey chuckled. "She gave one of my girls' nose an adjustment. I guess I'll look for Zeke and go from there." She thought about the stuff in her backpack. "When does the run start? I'm going to need a bit of time to change."

"Midnight. So you still have a few hours to socialize if you like."

"Gotcha. I'll see you later." Rey lifted her pop can in a little salute to Lyla and returned to the gathering. She scanned the room, looking for Zeke and Frost.

She eventually spotted Zeke talking to a thickly-built, highly toned man with a shaved head and a lithe female that stood close to him. Frost was in the opposite side of the room, standing by herself with arms folded in front of her. She was given space and she didn't look like she minded being left alone.

"Who to talk to first," Rey mused silently. "Frost doesn't seem to be looking for company, and Zeke is already talking to someone. Still, if I head for Zeke, I might be able to meet the people he's talking to."

She wended her way through the crowd, looking over the gathering for people that interested her, and who might be interested in return. There were several men that were attractive, but none caught her interest even remotely until she saw the dark skinned young man in the corner. He was standing next to an older man and they were talking. He seemed to sense her looking at him and when their eyes met he stared.

The older man turned his head to see who his companion was staring at, and Rey saw the right-hand side of his face was a mass of scar tissue. She held their gaze for a two heartbeats before letting her eyes slide away as she continued toward Zeke. This time, she was the one who felt someone watching, and she ignored the urge to cause her hips to sway just a little bit more as she walked.

A large, meaty hand grabbed her arm. "You shouldn't be here," a deep voice grumbled. "You shouldn't be running tonight."

Rey looked at the blunt fingers before slowly raising her eyes to look at the face of the man who held her. "Why not?" she asked mildly. "I was invited." Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Kim take a step forward but Lyla stopped her with a soft-spoken word.

"Because you're going to get hurt," he said, his ruddy complexion almost as red as his hair. Rey got the impression that he just might be at the front of the line to take a whack at her if she got in his way.

"Lyla would never have invited me if she didn't feel I could compete. Now please, let go of my arm." Rey's eyes never left his face, though it was not a challenging stare.

"You should be afraid of what might happen to you out there."

"I am," Rey replied with a slight shrug. Only a fool wouldn't be afraid of being around a group of werewolves bearing the scars - both physical and mental - of the recent war.

"Not afraid enough," he growled menacingly.

"I won't let fear rule me," Rey said, as she spent a little glamour to discover just what he might be afraid of. A little smile curved her lips and she stood on her tippy toes so she could whisper in his ear "and remember that the next time you hear the skittering in the dark."

The big man practically pushed her away when he released her and Rey felt the heady rush of his fear swirl around her. She drank it in as she continued on her way to Zeke, a little smile of satisfaction curving her lips for a moment. More eyes followed her, and Lyla's soothing voice could be heard in low tones, talking to the man who had accosted her.

The flood of fear-tainted magic Rey generated from the werewolf nearly caused her to stumble. The emotions of here were strong, stronger than humans and for a moment the small amount of magic she'd generated from the Uratha's fear threatened to overwhelm her senses. She'd have to be more careful in the future for she knew that the glamour she gained could be like a drug. Already, she was tempted to sample more.

She arrived near Zeke and the Uratha turned slightly and nodded at her. "Miss Lafitte," he said. "How's business?"

"Pretty good," Rey replied. "The casino's earnings are slightly higher than expected this quarter. The changes I made are paying off sooner than expected. How are you this evening?"

"Good," he nodded. "Rey, this is Thomas and his mate, Starsong." His companions turned and greeted Rey as well, offering hand shakes. Thomas' grip was firm but held back as if he was afraid that if he squeezed he'd reduce her hand to pulp. And given his muscles, he might be right. The woman next to him was attractive overall. Her body was in great shape, although that was a common trait among werewolves. Her face was pretty but not exceptionally remarkable. Her attraction was in how she moved. Her grip was a little more aggressive than her mate's. Or rather, by the matching rings on their fingers, her husband's.

"Nice to meet you both," Rey said, returning their handshakes with firm, confident ones of her own. She respected both their strengths, and saw no point of getting into any kind of pissing contest with either of them.

"We were just talking about you," Starsong said with a smile. "I was wondering if you were here looking for a mate tonight?"

"Not really," Rey replied, "and even if I were, I would never poach. Lyla invited me to participate, and I couldn't refuse. It's been a long time since I've run with a pack." In fact, she thought, she never really had. When she was human, she was almost always left behind, so if she ever did go out, it was with Grey or a couple of the other female members of the pack. "Why? Is there someone giving me the once over?" She smiled, her eyes twinkling with friendly amusement.

"Only about half the single wolves here," Starsong told her with an amused shine to her eyes. "So what pack did you use to run with?"

"The pack Lyla and Chaska used to belong with," Rey answered. "Our friendship actually goes back even before their First Change, but you probably already heard that. It's one of the reasons why I wanted to be a part of this tonight. We haven't had much opportunity to catch up since I moved here to Mythic, and it was a chance for me to meet more of the members of the Storm Front pack, and some of the other Uratha in the area." Rey tucked a loose tendril of hair behind her ear, and the gems in her ring glinted in the light.

Thomas seemed to notice the small fetish as his eyes flicked over it. His mate responded, "So back east then."

Her husband remarked, "Storm Front, under Chaska's and Lyla's leadership has been pretty progressive for Uratha who came from out east. I heard the packs out there are pretty conservative, but they aren't. I guess they liked the opportunity here, after the Pure were ousted from Santa Fe. But why did you come west? Did something happen back east?" Curiosity had caused him to wonder if there might have been more than the Silver Crusade motivating the Crusade's leadership.

"Me? It was too painful to stay and I needed to leave." Rey fought back the pain that surged in her heart. "Someone tricked my mate into thinking she was me. I don't know if our relationship can ever be repaired. I don't think it can. So I'm trying to build a new life for myself here."

Starsong frowned. "If someone did that to me, I would kill them."

"I wanted to as well," Rey replied, "but she is powerful, and I need to learn her secrets, her ban, if you could call it that. But I do not know if killing her would solve anything, as it was my mate who withdrew from me when he learned the truth." She paused, trying to figure out how to put the rest into words, one these people would understand. "There were those who said he never should have taken me for a mate, that I wasn't strong enough for him then, and perhaps they were right. If he cannot get past what happened and move on, he might not be strong enough for me." It was not physical strength Rey spoke of, but she suspected the Uratha she spoke with realized that.

Perhaps it was uncharitable of her to think that of Grey, but the presence of her Fetch made it impossible for her to stay. She could not live in its shadow, being forced to hide and watch it live her life. Of Ironclaw and Grey, only Ironclaw asked if she wanted the thing destroyed. But she'd said no. That thing held a portion of her soul and she meant to get it back.

In the month or so after she'd escaped the Hedge, Rey had seen her mate perhaps a total of one week. He'd retreated into Shadow as he had before when he hurt and needed time. She waited for him, the first two times he'd left. Before she'd been Taken, she'd have waited for him forever, no matter how long it took. But Rey wasn't the same woman she was before she was dragged into Arcadia by the Lord of the Crossroads.

That time had forged her into something new. Something stronger. Perhaps it was that which Grey could not reconcile. Or perhaps it was the brief glimpse she'd given him of what she truly looked like, behind her Mask, she thought bitterly. He said he loved her, with and without fleas. If he could not handle that, accept it, then perhaps this breakdown, the failure of their relationship, was the best.

Starsong was watching Rey and there was sympathy in her eyes, as if she sensed some of what Rey was thinking. "Maybe tonight will be a pleasant diversion then. Or at least a different diversion than what you might have had."

"That's what I'm hoping," Rey said. "I'd also like a chance to win tonight, but I won't if I'm out there on my own. I don't suppose you'd be willing to take me on as a teammate tonight, Zeke?" She didn't know what answer he might give, but if he said no, she'd seek out the rest of the Storm Front pack. Hopefully one of them would say yes.

He grinned. "Sure Rey. But you should know I'm running with Morrison, Truman, Derek and Frost. If one of us wins we've agreed to take the mate for the night thing as a prize, but the guys and I have decided Frost should have it. She needs to get laid, bad. And we'd appreciate it if you didn't mention that to her. She still thinks we are going for the fetish prize." Zeke talked about her like she was one of the guys, and that might be how it is. If Frost didn't see herself that way she might not appreciate their well-intentioned gesture.

"No problem," Rey replied. "If you think she in such dire need, I'd be glad to help." Not getting a prize wouldn't be all that bad, though if she won, she'd be sure Frost knew who the instigators were. "Do you have someone in mind for her, or are you going to let her choose?"

"I'm not sure she'd let us make a choice for her," he grinned. "I have no idea who she might choose, but that's part of the fun. I'm hoping she might choose Bearman, or one of the other members of the pack. She isolates herself a lot with her plants."

Rey nodded in understanding. "What'll you do if she won't take the prize?"

"Draw straws to see who gets it, then," Zeke told her. "We won't make her, but we'll probably tease her endlessly about it if she doesn't. I think she will, though."

"Oh, I've been the brunt of a pack's teasing," Rey said with a chuckle. "I can completely sympathize." She took a sip of her Diet Coke, then looked at Thomas. "You noticed my ring, eh? It was a gift from Lyla and the pack."

"Looks nice. Isn't that a fetish?" Thomas asked. Starsong took interest, too, noticing the ring as well.

Rey nodded. "It is. I like to wear it whenever I can. Not just because it's useful, but I consider it a real honor to be given it. I know how much work goes into creating one." She also considered it to be an outward sign of favor, of her alliance with the Storm Front pack. As such, it held significance amongst the Uratha, but more importantly, it was a sign to the Duchy - and more importantly the other Lord Sages - of her connection to supernaturals other than themselves.

She looked down at the ring and smiled, then returned her gaze to Thomas and Starsong. "There's also the added bonus that it's a beautiful ring," she finished with a grin. She'd have worn far worse to the Run if it was a gift from the pack.

Zeke nodded. "Yep, that's the one that Chaska made. Well, Chaska and Lyla together, I think, but he was the ritual master, I'm pretty sure."

"That's what Lyla told me. I can only imagine what he's got in that sack," Rey said. Her interest was really just curiosity, as it would indeed make for a valuable item to trade.

Starsong said, "I guess only Chaska and Lyla know." Zeke nodded. "But I'd like to find out." Thomas agreed, putting in, "Which is why we are going for the fetish instead. We've already got who we want to mate with."

Starsong jabbed him in the ribs, but smiled.

Rey chuckled, though she felt a pang of jealousy for them having each other, whereas she was alone. She'd never really considered finding a lover before. Certainly not another Changeling. It would certainly make things easier, not having to worry about hiding who and what she was, but it somehow seemed wrong.

She pushed thoughts of comforting arms and warm bodies aside and asked "how long have the two of you been together?"

Thomas answered immediately, "Two weeks."

"Well, we'd been friends for a lot longer than that, though," Starsong put in.

"Congratulations." Rey considered briefly teasing Thomas a bit, but decided discretion was the better part of survival. "How many other mated couples are participating tonight," she asked, looking around the room.

"There are a few," Starsong replied. "Not a whole lot since some mated couples didn't want to risk someone

taking their mate as the prize."

Thomas added, "But we figure it was worth the risk for a chance at the fetish."

Starsong smiled. "There aren't many couples to begin with, though. That's kind of the point of this whole thing. There just aren't enough females, either wolf or wolfblood." She paused to see if Rey knew what she meant by 'wolfblood'.

Rey nodded her understanding. "It's an opportunity to meet people you otherwise might not, given the circumstances. Wolfbloods, being the children of Uratha and humans, straddle both worlds. I'd think that a wolfblood would be a better mate to have, as you don't have to worry about them freaking out when their mate shifts forms." She didn't add that if a wolfblood was here, he or she already know about werewolves, so there was no concern about having to teach them about the world they were a part of. "Makes introductions a bit easier too." She smiled.

Thomas nodded. "Exactly. Now, I heard that the Stormfront Pack had some leads on wolfblood families that were formerly controlled by the Pure?"

Zeke looked uncomfortable. "Ah, well... I know that's an important matter for a lot of us. A wolfblood family was found, yes. But as you know the Pure are not kind to mortal kin. They are... being evaluated currently."

"Under Stormfront's eyes, I presume?" said Thomas neutrally.

"Actually, no. Chaska asked for the senior members of the Iron Masters tribe to look into it. Don't ask me why, but I'm sure he had a reason. Anyway, those wolfbloods are the Iron Masters' problem now. I guess they'll be introduced when — or if — the Iron Masters say they should."

Starsong murmured. "They might want to keep those wolfbloods for themselves. Political bargaining power."

"That wouldn't be received very well by the packs, especially if they have a lot of available females," Thomas put in.

"I'm sure Chaska has thought of that," Rey said, "and some kind of arrangement's been made." She liked to think she knew Chaska well enough to think he was keeping the health and happiness of all the Uratha in the area in mind, and not just trying to benefit a single tribe or pack.

As the hour approached midnight, the mood of the room became more focused as the participants' anticipation of the hunt - and the prizes - rose. Rey had spent the time moving around the room, listening to snippets of conversation and chatting. She felt more eyes on her, attention becoming stronger. The heady mix of lust and excitement swirled around her, and it took some effort not to taste it. Now would not be a good time to give in to the temptation.

At 11:30, Zeke caught Rey's eye and signaled for her to join him and the rest of the group she was running with. She made her way toward the group, watching them watching her.

They were all there, some she knew and others she didn't. Zeke and Frost, she'd met before. Morrison, Truman and Derek she didn't know, and she wasn't sure which was which. Fortunately, Zeke took care of that for her.

"Hey Rey. This guy is Bloodtooth." He socked a handsome young man in the shoulder. Bloodtooth wore a leather vest and no shirt underneath. It showed with some prominence a necklace bearing a large tooth. He complemented the vest with worn blue jeans. He'd already kicked off his shoes. When he looked at Rey, it was like he was staring at some point just behind her. "Hey," he said.

Zeke jabbed a finger in the direction of a thin guy with wavy, shoulder-length brown hair. He was tanned, but had some scars across his well-muscled chest and biceps. "That's Morrison, if you couldn't tell. The other guy is Derek."

Derek had short, black hair and heavy brows that lent him a brooding look. Dark eyes glittered at Rey from deep in their sockets. He had a flannel shirt and blue jeans on tonight. Derek nodded at Rey.

"Nice to meet you," she said. She noted, even calmly admired, Morrison's visible scars. She suspected everyone present bore some as survivors of the war against the Pure. "Thanks for letting me run with you tonight. I'll try not to slow you down." She looked around the gathered group, looking at their faces to gauge their reactions.

Rey didn't know if she would be able to keep up with the group, though she'd never tried to see exactly how quickly she could run and for how long. Speed tonight would be an asset, if only to find the quarry first.

Zeke smiled at Rey and nodded. Bloodtooth shrugged, and Derek glanced at her then started stripping off his shirt. Morrison lounged, putting his back against the flat grey wall. He gave her a look that could only be called, "smouldering". It was the kind of look that could get a lot of women going.

Frost, however, stared at Rey unhappily. "So now we have to split the prize with her, too?"

Zeke laughed. "Let's just win this thing. We can worry about who gets what later. We'll draw straws or something."

Frost didn't look any happier at the notion.

Rey shrugged and set Frost's concerns aside. Any declarations of not wanting the prize would likely fall on deaf ears, and she wasn't about to say anything about what would happen if they won. Instead, she allowed herself to watch Derek undress for a moment before she took off her own shirt. Beneath it she wore a deep green sports bra, the kind female athletes wore when running.

She'd decided before she came that she'd take her shirt off and leave it behind, just in case her clothes got shredded by something, leaving her with nothing to wear. She felt more comfortable shifting into her wolf form wearing lighter fitting clothes, though it really made no difference what she wore. As an added benefit, it showed off her own scars, as well as hints of her tattoos.

Rey folded her shirt up neatly and placed it on the floor, then looked at Morrison to see if the smouldering had changed.

It hadn't, though he'd added a wolfish smile.

The time for the game to start neared. Frost changed suddenly and without shedding or shredding her clothes. They simply disappeared somewhere in the moment between human form and her wolf form. The grey and white wolf she became shook herself, sniffed and then sneezed.

Rey shook her head and chuckled as she gathered the power she needed to change. With a thought, she invoked the Contract of Fang and Talon and assumed the form of a wolf the size of a man. To those who saw her Mask and knew about wolves, she knew that even apart from her size, she looked unusual. She was a mix of several species of wolf; red wolf features and the coloring of a grey wolf, with a pure white spot on her chest like a black wolf.

Wolf-Rey? gave herself a shake and wiggle, letting things settle into place. She caught herself from laughing, however, when she remembered the last time she'd done that. She'd come across a small family of wolves near Mount Washington, so out of place in that wilderness. She'd changed forms and the cubs had taken the

wiggle as an invitation to pounce and play as if she were a littermate. Their dam wasn't in the slightest bit impressed, and it had taken some talking to convince her Rey wasn't a threat.

The other werewolves finished changing and followed Frost to the starting area. A single word from Chaska began the chase. The fox-spirit had already been released in the warehouse itself.

Werewolves in small groups and alone tore off over huge stacks of crates, and leaped over pitfalls designed to slow a wolf in pursuit. Rey's own form towered over most the other wolves aside from a couple Rahu Blood Talons that had mastered a greater form of shifting.

Once the scent had been caught, the leading wolves broke ahead. The fox had found a way out of the warehouse and led them all on a merry chase up the mountainside. A group of Blood Talons led by their alpha, a sleek, quick man named Cholo that included his mate and another member of his pack darted ahead and quickly disappeared. Another group made up of members of the Hunters in Darkness tribe and led by a native wolf named Winds Fury fell behind. Zeke and his Bone Shadows found a place they might slip into shadow and pursue from there, but decided against it — as long as the fox spirit was in the mortal realm, it might be too easy to lose it. Also, Rey might not react well to being in an environment so alien to her own nature.

But the chase was brought to a conclusion in less than an hour. Winds Fury's group, which included his mate and others of his own Seering Eye pack, had outwitted the fox spirit, which had doubled-back on the charging Blood Talons and pursuing Bone Shadows. The creature had given nearly all the wolves the slip, but had managed only to walk right into the waiting, grinning jaws of Winds Fury and his people.

To everyone's excitement, Winds Fury chose Chaska's fetish prize. It turned out to be well worth it, as it was a klaive taken as a prize of war from the Pure. The grisly weapon, powered by a strong spirit, and made of tough wood, sinew and teeth, would serve its master well in the future.

The evening's celebration stretched into the night with some of the wolves making acquaintances they didn't have before, and others finding rivalries as it was the way among the Uratha.

A few of the Uratha, especially the single males, made a point of approaching Rey. They talked and traded flirtation, but that was all she would give them. In the end she went home alone.