

Three months pass and the reign of Autumn has just begun.

Body Double & Night Haunts

With his father in obvious ill health, Simon set the matter of what his father had done to him aside. Now confined to a wheelchair and trapped in a dying body, his father had already begun to suffer in a physical prison that fate itself had wrought upon him.

The matter of William Drew, the fetch that had taken over his life was a matter of some interest. Concerned the fetch might be doing something that could bring dishonor to his family name, he did some checking. He discovered that William Drew as now a priest himself and presided over his own parish in Phoenix. With the fetch well out of his way, Simon's concern over the matter diminished.

Mundane interests occupied some of his time. In that area he had the developing financial concerns of governing the Rose Councils funds (which mostly consisted of money that Queen Cassandra seemed to bring in). The source of the funds weren't difficult to discover as she appeared in magazines and art as a model and even appeared in a few brief commercials dancing and moving. Pictures and video never seemed to be able to catch the spellbinding effect she had in person, however, and she tended to blend in with numerous other models of today's media-centric age.

Simon's attention was also occupied by a new project. He purchased a nightclub. The former bar and grill had failed, but Simon's real estate agent assured him it was well positioned to be successful if it was converted into the kind of nightclub Simon was interested in. Renovations took weeks and the investment of all Simon's capital, but it began producing an immediate return. The grand opening saw a number of exclusive acts and was very well received. The packed club immediately began swelling Simon's coffers with a large, fresh infusion of cash. Thinking of the pledge he'd made with the Queen, Simon knew it was Fate's hand. All he had to do then, was keep things running and avoid any potential bumps in the road.

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The Lord Sage of the Unknown Reaches and the Lady

The sand-changeling known as Lord Sage Joshua was a very deliberate person. When he visited her in her office atop the Mountain Gardens Hotel & Casino, Rey had been at first very nervous. He spoke of being directed here by the Queen of Spring, who, as it turned out, had told him that Rey was in close contact with a band of werewolves.

Lord Joshua had then begun a careful investigation based on what little he could find about Rey Lafitte. He told her that he hadn't been able to learn much but what he did know had intrigued him greatly. He only hinted at knowing her past before being Taken, and likely a hint was all he knew. What he was sure of was that Rey had managed to forge some kind of positive relationship with a pack of werewolves and that was an achievement, he told her, worthy of recognition. At least, in certain circles who appreciated such things.

So, the Lord Sage offered her full membership. Not apprenticeship, which was offered to those who petitioned to join the entitlement but had not earned it, but rather full membership. No strings, no apprenticeship, just recognition and encouragement to continue to do what she was already doing. Her goals and the Lord Sages' seemed right in line and as long as that was the case, their resources could be extended to her in the form of expertise in specific areas, just as her expertise was in werewolf customs and social mores.

Once accepted, the entitlement took hold, subtly altering Rey's fae mein over the next couple months so that the freehold knew that she was now a Lady Sage.

Eventually Rey's other interests began to show some success as well. She left the care of her stable of hookers to Mizuko and she soon showed she was quite adept at managing things on her own. The "stable"

was housed in low-rent rooms of an old tenement building and Rey arranged for donations to a police charity with subtle mention that she'd appreciate the local cops to ignore the area. That left the hookers alone to work their trade and without police there, Mizuko was left to manage their security.

Two of the hookers were elevated in Rey's organization to something somewhat more glamorous. Finding two of them attractive, trainable and of a manageable temperament, Rey employed them to be courtesans to high-rolling gamblers. Rey learned from the staff that the happier her rich clients were, the more they spent. Rey wanted her clients to be very, very happy. During this time, Mizuko began to spend a little more time at the casino and a little less time at the brothel. She said little, as was her habit, but she was watching both Rey's back, and the training Rey gave the two new courtesans.

Near the end of summer's reign Rey was visited by her old friend, Lyla. Pleased with Rey's results, and in remarkably high spirits, the werewolf female offered Rey an invitation to run with the Storm Front pack at the next Full Moon Meet. This was a monthly event sponsored by Chaska and the Storm Front Pack which invited allied Uratha packs to get together on a hunt — for their Pure enemies in the national forests surrounding the Mythic area. Lately, the Pure had learned to lie low during this time, but the tradition continued, substituting a buck or other game if Pure antagonism had diminished that month. Lyla even presented Rey with a gift, something she told Rey was a very special fetish. This came in the form of an attractive ring with a cluster of gemstones set within it. The stones were all the same but for one. When Rey was ready, Lyla would teach her how to use it.

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Report & Counterstrike

Less's report was coolly received by Duchy officials. Autumn and Spring seemed uninterested in Circledell, but they did not meet personally with Less so he didn't know exactly why. Summer was reigning when Less delivered the report and the Storm King had to tell him the Duchy would not authorize a strike on Circledell. Although Less could see the Storm King didn't like doing nothing, Jeremiah Storm was compelled to point out that with the cold war with the Goblin King now reduced to a low simmer, a direct attack on one of his outposts could cause things to erupt into more warfare. The Duchy, over the past two years, was still struggling to operate while a large number of high-ranking positions were still vacant — casualties of the war with the Goblin King. To renew the conflict now might court disaster.

But somehow, the Glacial Axe saw the report as well. Their leadership approached Less on the matter directly. These consisted of the two members who'd originally approached the Duchy to offer their service over a year ago. Now this man and woman changeling, Knights as they referred to themselves, commanded twenty changelings who were willing to die to defeat the Goblin King and win this war. They were in fact keenly interested in Less's report. Although he had nothing to tell them that they didn't already see in that report, the Knights of the Glacial Axe were still convinced something could be done without compromising the Duchy or going against the wishes of her rulers.

To this end the Knights had a request of Less Seleman as the nominal leader of the Wardens of the Bleak Seal. They wished to use his Network as a base to launch scouting missions in and around Circledell in order to determine the true strength of the Goblin King's forces and to determine how likely residents were to take up against the Duchy should they launch an attack. The Knights of the Glacial Axe were not, however, interested in saving a bunch of non-changeling slaves from their fates.

This was a careful decision Less was still pondering by the end of summer's reign.

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Reality Check

The summer was a time of learning for Mizuko. She abandoned the mortal side of her old life at Ottowi Pond to live with Rey and manage security for Rey and her new brothel. She was used to dealing with street people, but dealing with these women was a whole new challenge for her. The fact that none of them understood sign language worth a damn made things all the more challenging, but she found ways to get her meaning across to them. Luckily, they all respected her because they knew that she and Rey had saved them from a grisly death at the hands of an Axe Gang professional killer.

After two were promoted to work in the casino, the remaining six were gloomy and resentful. Mizuko insulated Rey from this, and concentrated on making their lives a little bit better than they had been in hopes they'd leave their failure to measure up to Rey's demanding standards for what a proper "companion" for high-roller gamblers should be.

Watching over the brothel and its members turned out to be a full-time job and then some, Mizuko very quickly learned. So, following Rey's example, she found someone to help her out. Rey knew someone was added to the payroll and even met Mizuko's new hired help.

Perhaps Mizuko grew too comfortable in her new role. Or perhaps she'd allowed herself to develop a habit. Whatever the case, on the first day of Autumn's reign, the hitman finally caught up her. He looked like anyone else on the street that day, dressed neatly but not too neatly. Scoping out the hookers from behind dark sunglasses, Mizuko hadn't recognized him when she walked past. When he shot her in the stomach as she passed by with a smile and a nod, she was completely shocked. She had fallen to her knees before she'd even realized she'd been hit.

It was pure reflex when she'd turned a puddle of water on the street leftover from fire hydrant testing to ice in front of the moving garbage truck. It had been accelerating away from an intersection and it immediately slipped out of control and slammed into the assassin as he crossed the street, breaking many of his bones and killing him instantly in the process.

When Amber found her lying on the sidewalk, two of hookers gathered around her not knowing what to do, Mizuko had been gathering her elemental reserves and hoping she wouldn't bleed out before she made it back to the Hollow. Amber wanted Mizuko in the hospital immediately, but Mizuko refused, telling her to first get her home and after that she could tell Rey. With a little luck, she might be able to make it into the Hollow before she passed out.

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Rover had a busy couple months as well. With Rey's help he was able to get a small repair shop up and running.

Later that summer, after some considerable time and effort, Mizuko brought in the two tokens the motley had brought in. The amber colored flask was one that Mizuko had pocketed but she shared what she found out about it with Rover. The dead man's boot had some practical application as well.

The boots enhanced a person's ability to move without being seen or heard and hide effectively, but there was an unavoidable price of course. For as long as the boots' magic was active, it leeches the user's very will. Eventually, a person would become mentally exhausted and the boots would cease to function. Still, the leeching occurred over hours of use making the boots very viable as a tool.

The amber flask (this one just big enough to hold one gallon) was also interesting. Mizuko told him that it was guaranteed to make a person safe, but that she was pretty sure Rover wouldn't be interested in it and that he really ought not to play with it in any way. She told him that to use it a person need only whisper into the empty bottle and beg of its protection. Somehow, she "forgot" it in his possession in his section of the Hollow, where its presence taunted him mercilessly.

How could he resist that?

Well, the flask worked all right. It sucked him inside like he was a genie and imprisoned him in the blasted thing for hours before Mizuko returned grinning at his unfortunate fate. Stuck in miniature and powerless to escape, he watched Mizuko as she signed to him that it would only hold him for an hour, if he used glamour to activate it. Without that, the prison was permanent. On the plus side, he didn't feel any pangs of hunger or thirst, but on the down side, he just wasn't big enough to break the bottle. Mizuko informed him that she'd discovered the bottle was nearly indestructible even from outside and that what damage could be done, the bottle would magically heal give a little time.

Somehow, Mizuko was able to release the irritated gnome, however. How she did it, she wouldn't say, but simply warned him that he should really use a bit of glamour when activating it. Then, it's an excellent hiding place and pretty secure from harm — say should there be an accident in a lab, or if some thugs come looking for someone with the flask in their possession.

She apologized for tricking the gnome, but she obviously thought it had been pretty funny.

Beyond those things, Rover was in charge managing the Hollow expansions. The motley had specific ideas, but Rover was especially creative in coming up with solutions to provide better security, places for Doors, and beginning the construction of a house for use by the motley. For much of the summer he had mostly only Mizuko's pet otter, Oliver, as company. But as Autumn's reign began, the motley had agreed to come together to work on the hollow and get some things finished. So today, and for much of the week, Rover was expecting most of the motley to arrive and begin the work that no machines or tools could do — work that required the use of Wyrd to manipulate the Hedge.

Rover's first indication that the first of the motley members had arrived was in hearing a splash. Leaving the platform that would eventually become the motley's house up the cave wall, he brushed off and wandered down the path to the spring. The one most likely to have taken a swim was Mizuko, so it was a good guess she was the first to arrive.

Usually when she came in, it was to swim in the spring and play with Ollie. She did so naked, so Rover was in the habit of averting his eyes out of curtesy and a little respect for her privacy. But something was wrong. Ollie was up on shore, running back and forth. The little mammal was usually sleek and wet from spending most of his time in the water, but today his fur coat was bone dry and he didn't look so good. He kept sneezing and chittering.

The second thing that told him something was wrong was that there were droplets of something dark in a fine trail from the Door that had recently been built to Rey's home in the mortal world all the way down to the spring. Rover's eyes snapped toward the water.

Mizuko was fully clothed and floating on her back just beneath the surface of the water. A dark stain was spreading out from her and she was staring up toward the sky.

"Dammit..." Rover swore to himself. Mizuko looked to be in serious trouble and it didn't take a genius to guess what that dark stain might be in the water. It looked like she'd been seriously injured, hopefully not beyond help.

A thought flickered across the gnome's agile mind that this might be another of her practical jokes. She did seem to like practicing her wit on others, but this would be one sick sense of humor if that's what it was. At least the flask *had* been funny. This was just disturbing.

Not wasting any time in doubt, Rover flicked his iron marble towards the water and leapt into the bronze saddle of the mechanical mount. Canine paws digging impossibly into the fluid surface of the pond, he headed towards the bleeding changeling.

Once he reached her and dragged her to shore, Rover was able to get a look at her injury. He had to rip aside enough of her shirt to expose her belly, but there it was. A gunshot wound. Moving her had to be painful but he had to look and see if the bullet had exited. It hadn't.

He noticed she was watching him through half-closed eyes.

Not wasting time with displays of emotion, Rover began stripping off his own shirt. The gray, rocky surface covering his pate seemed to extend entirely along his body. It was like the gnome had been born of stone and then left out in the sun far too long.

"Rover, I need to clean this wound with some water. Do not be alarm." She reached toward the water and it rapidly flowed toward her, up her leg and then into her wound. She gasped as she willed the water into the belly wound and looked even more pale than she had when he had pulled her out of the water. But she caused it to do the cleaning for her and soon the now-crimson water flowed back into the pond.

Ollie was still chittering and scrambling back and forth on the bank desperately. Now Rover realized it wasn't just because it sensed something was wrong with Mizuko. He glanced at the water and saw dead fish floating on the surface.

"Rover," Mizuko spoke again, drawing his attention back to her. *"I must heal. I took too long in coming here, now only my power sustains me, and that will not hold for long. I need the goblin fruit from the garden."*

The girl must be delirious. Rover knew that Auriel had begun maintaining a garden that contained a variety of delicious but otherwise unremarkable varieties of goblin fruit. It was still hit and miss whether there would be a little or a lot available, but to his knowledge there were no blushberries, no healing fruit of any kind there.

Rover's shirt was now bunched into a tight wad and pressed against the wound. He might not know much about emergency treatment, but at least he could recognize a lethal flow of blood. Keeping pressure against it would slow the blood loss a bit. Maybe enough to even help save the injured changeling.

"Keep pressing down on this... right here." Rover guided her hands to the proper locale. *"I'll go get the fruit."*

His short legs carried him back on top of BoBo? and the gnome headed for their garden. Maybe there wouldn't be any healing fruit, but 'Zuko needed something to get a little life back into her system. She'd lost a lot of blood and damn near any nutrient would be a godsend right now.

Besides, if the fruit gave her enough strength, perhaps she'd be able to finish the healing on her own terms. Either that or allow the power that was keeping her alive to last until the rest of the motley appeared.

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The nervous-looking young woman who'd barged into Rey's office past a flustered secretary was dressed in casual clothes and minimal makeup so well applied one might not think she wore any at all. She had curly red hair she wore just to her shoulders. For a moment, Rey didn't recognize her. It had been months since she'd seen the woman last. It occurred to her who it was once she began talking.

The red-head stopped and stared open-mouthed at Rey for a long moment before she found her voice and got to business. *"Miss Lafitte? I'm Amber. I work for you out at the tenement building?"* Rey knew this, but had let Mizuko handle it. She hadn't met Amber personally since the night she was saved from the hunter.

"Um. Listen, something has happened. There was an attempt. Mizuko's been shot and she won't go to the hospital. I tried to make her but she had me take her home. I thought you needed to know right away because I think she's in bad shape. She told me to go away! I don't know why. She kept saying she was going home and wandering around the house like she was looking for something she couldn't find. I wouldn't leave, but then she just disappeared! I don't understand it, but ..." Amber wrung her hands, distraught and confused. "I didn't know what else to do."

"I need you to focus, Amber," Rey said, her voice calm and assured, though her mind and heart were racing. "What happened to the shooter, and were any of the girls hurt?"

"I think the guy who shot her was hit by a garbage truck. Anna — she's one of the hookers that works for you and who saw it all happen — says it just spun out of control and hit him full on. Odd luck, huh?"

Rey's only reply to that was a nod. "Amber, I need you to go back to the tenement and check on the girls. Keep them calm, and tell them I'll take care of things. Keep an eye out for trouble. Someone might decide to take advantage of the situation."

Amber nodded and quickly made her way out of the office to do just that, but not before Rey noticed she was watching Rey out of the corner of her eyes. Rey suspected Amber could see her true form.

Rey quickly dialed her secretary's extension. "Olivia, something's come up and I have to go. I'll probably be gone for the rest of the day. If anyone calls, tell them I'm off-site and take a message. Tell Joseph to go ahead and order the new chips for the casino, and tell Andrew I'm not approving his request to renovate the Cabana Bar until I see the bids he's gotten for the work, which he still hasn't give me. If he gives you a hard time, politely remind him if he wants to keep getting a paycheck, he follows proper procedure. I'm tired of being overcharged by his buddies."

After that, Rey headed home and then to the Hollow, where she met the rest of the motley members.

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Less, Rey and Simon appeared nearly at the same time. Less and Simon were here because this was the time they'd said they'd show up to help with the Hollow. Rey had planned that as well, but her arrival had a sense of urgency since she already knew Mizuko had been shot.

Seleman had arrived via his own network, which connected via the back of the little cave that was next to the spring. This had him walking almost directly to the shore upon which Mizuko was sprawled clutching a bloody shirt to her middle. A glance up the sides of the depression that held the spring, garden, and cave told him Rey and Simon had seen the injured nymph as well and were hurrying down the winding path. They arrived momentarily.

Auriel, the sprite, was hovering nearby watching Mizuko curiously. When she saw Less and the others, she remarked. "The nymph has a piece of metal in her belly but that is the least of her worries now." She pointed out at the spring and the dead fish floating within. "She cleaned the wound with poisoned water."

Ollie chittered anxiously.

Simon rushed to Mizuko's side, dropped to his knees and poured healing energy into her with the breath of Spring. The bullet, he could handle. The poison, he wasn't sure about.

"Poisoned water?" Rey looked at Auriel, anger at the potential invasion of their hollow in her glowing eyes. "How did that happen?" She pulled off the jacket of her expensive skirt suit and tossed it aside as she joined Simon and Mizuko's side. Rey had seen that kind of nasty wound before. It had to have been done with something sometimes called a "safety" round because it tended to flatten out and lodge in walls (or people)

rather than continuing through to possibly endanger people other than the target. Often, these were hollow point bullets and to unarmored targets, they did massive damage to anything soft — like people.

The little faery shrugged. "It was fine this morning."

"Damn," Rey said. "The assassin used a hollow point. We need to get the bullet out."

Poison! thought Less, extremely alarmed. With Rey and Simon crowded around the poor girl, and with Rover probably on his way with whatever goblin fruit he could muster from the garden, he decided he couldn't do much good up close. His skills were not in the medical arts, that was for sure. He did the only thing he could do. Calling upon his contract with the element of air, he funnelled a clean stream of oxygen to Mizuko's face to ease her breathing. Concentrating on keeping the flow going, he scanned the shores of the pond for some evidence of the source of the poison.

Less's sharp eyes scanned the surrounding landscape. At the top of the surrounding cliff walls were thick Hedge bushes and trees that stood guard over the Hollow. In many places, the Hedge had been encouraged to grow thicker in order to provide something like a solid wall for the Hollow. After all, building an entirely artificial wall would make the Hollow far too obvious to passing Gentry. As a result of this growth many trees, armed with thorns and thick branches, stood guard over the growing Hollow. One of these sported something Less hadn't noticed before. Far up in its heavy, black limbs was a huge nest. Something had moved in very recently. The nest was well hidden and if he hadn't been looking at just the right place at the right time, Less might never have noticed it himself.

"I need a knife, small and thin," Simon commanded. "I really need a lot of other stuff like really bright light, a clean room, and several units of blood, but I can use magic to substitute for all that. Pliers or real forceps would be nice, too."

Ironically, the one person who knew exactly where to find all the tools Simon would need was off gathering additional aid. Rover had spent as much time as he dared rummaging around the garden and was ready to return with two prize specimens. Leaping back to his mount, the gnome began to speed his way back towards the others.

Less nodded to himself and bit his lip. He wondered what sort of creature would poison its environment. *Maybe ones that scavenged the bodies?*

"Can we move her?" the air elemental asked as he hooked his umbrella onto his forearm. "We'll be closer to all those things you need, and away from this poisoned water." He would bring up the nest once Mizuko was taken care of. A flicker of movement caught his eye and he was reminded that the Sprite was watching the events unfold. "Auriel, go in and bring us a long, thin knife or some pliers. Quickly! Simon needs it to pull the bullet out of Mizuko."

"Maybe?" Simon said. "If we can keep her flat..." His eyes cast about. "That plank will work, he said, pointing. "do you have what I need at home," he asked Rey? "high-end first aid gear? If so, run ahead, pull it out, then start filling your bathtub. Less and I will bring Mizuko."

Simon could only give part of his attention to the answers. The rest was reserved for Mizuko: keeping pressure on the wound (now with his shirt replacing the soaked bandage), murmuring words of encouragement, and trying to keep her conscious. He was almost trying to sustain her life by sheer force of will.

"My first aid kit as long tweezers in it," Rey said as she stood. "I'll meet you back at the house." She turned and sprinted for the Door back to her home.

"Oh hello Simon," Mizuko said. She read the concern in his eyes. "Don't feel bad. I'm sorry for ruining

another of your shirts. Also, if Rey finds out I got shot, tell her that it's okay and that I got the hitman. I'm just sorry I didn't see him coming. I should have seen it, but I didn't. I was thinking about coming home to see everyone and I didn't pay attention so he got me." She was mumbling and didn't make a whole lot of sense. *"If I die, Amber will take care of the girls. She's not a fighter but she'll call if there's trouble. It'll work out. Oh yeah. And I ensorcelled her. Sorry I didn't tell you, but I thought Less would be angry with me. She can see us now. I just couldn't keep lying to all her questions about that night. It really disturbed her. She wouldn't tell anyone anyway."*

Her babbling was *definitely* making it very hard for Simon to do his job, due to the distracting effect she had. He kept forgetting to watch for bleeding and once even let the shirt-bandage fall off her.

Less dashed to the pile of construction materials that Rover was using to expand the Hollow-House[?]. He selected a wide Hedge-cut plank from Rover's new portable sawmill, still sticky with sap. He dragged it back and laid it next to the stricken girl. "Tell me what you need me to do," said Less anxiously, but he was still a bit distracted by the nest and kept glancing back to it. "Ollie," he called to the pet otter. "Come over here. Stay with us."

"Zuko, please hush for a bit, baby. I need to think," Simon said. "We're going to get you taken care of." He cleared his head enough to answer Less. "Put the plank down right beside Mizuko. You're going to get her legs and ass. I'm going to get her head and shoulders. We're going to try to pick her up and put her on the plank as gently as possible. We want to keep her abdomen still. The bullet could tear up more stuff. When we carry her through the Door aim for the kitchen. The object is to move her as little as possible, okay? Then I'll try to get the bullet out. It shouldn't be too different than removing an arrow head or a broken knife blade." Simon thought it best not to mention that his success rate on such impromptu surgery was actually fairly low. He wouldn't try at all except that Mizuko didn't look like she'd last long enough for an ambulance to get to the house, and that wasn't even considering the poison.

The motley acted quickly, with Rey leading the way to the Door to her home and Rover following close behind. Less and Simon handled the job of carrying Mizuko on the plank, being very careful not to spill her onto the ground, and got her into Rey's house.

Once there, Rey retrieved the first aid kit and the long tweezers within and Simon went to work. Mizuko had no anesthesia, though, and couldn't help screaming when he had to dig around in her gut looking for the bullet. It took a couple of them to hold her down. There was a lot of blood.

Five minutes of effort had been exhausting. Simon reached for the saline bottle to irrigate the wound. Quickly. He wasn't sure how much longer Mizuko could last, or even if she was still alive. As soon as he thought he could risk it, he started to heal her, and olppired everything he had into it. "Please be alive," he whispered.

After his using his magic to help her body heal, Simon saw a little of the deathly grey in her face fade, though she looked rather green. Her voice was raw from screaming and her eyes red from tears of pain. She managed to ask Rover if he'd found her fruit, that she could recover from the wound but she needed the fruit — any fruit.

Rover showed his finds to her, his mind clearing of wonder at how she was going to eat them. The girl hadn't been in much shape to even try up until now. Fortunately, she seemed to ahve improved enough to at least give it a shot. Although a part of his clinical mind did wonder about the wisdom of feeding a patient with an abdominal gunshot wound...

"Wait a second," Rey said. "Mizuko, why were you wandering around the house before you went through the Door?"

Mizuko signed tiredly. "I thought I'd lost something. I was trying to find it, but I just couldn't. So, I used the

door to the Hollow when Amber wasn't looking."

"What did you think you'd lost?" Rey asked. "I'll go look for it for you. Moving around like you did with the bullet inside you only made things worse." She made a mental note of getting a cell phone for Amber for situations like this.

"It's not a place or thing," Mizuko signed. "I don't know what it is, just that I needed to find it."

A foggy memory from a few months past tugged at Less' brain. From when they were dealing with the mad doctor and Mizuko's lost friends. She had told him that her memories had blacked out during most of the combat. And now it had happened again. Could it be related? Less had a theory that the Queen of Autumn may have had a hand in Mizuko's temporary "madness".

"Mizuko," said Less calmly, so as not to alarm the patient. "While you were searching did you have any thoughts of Veridia, or of the Autumn Court specifically?"

She shook her head slowly, no. She glanced at Rey furtively; she was a terrible liar, she knew. She signed very hesitantly. "No. I was looking for something that isn't there, but it feels like it is sometimes. I just... it was like when I was trying to find my way back home through the Hedge. Only I just couldn't find it. So I kept walking until I thought I couldn't walk much more, and went to the Hollow when Amber wasn't looking."*

Simon knew something important was going on, but his focus was still more on Mizuko's physical, rather than mental, health. "Mizuko, the goblin fruits will help you heal?" he asked. "Are you okay to eat them? I can give you some more healing if you need it. I think we really want to get you off this floor. I *know* I'd like to be off this floor."

In answer, Mizuko reached for the magical food in Rover's hand. One of the, which looked and smelled like the inside of a walnut was actually sweet and melted on her tongue like cotton candy. She popped the other one (it looked like a fat, minty-smelling leaf) and stuffed it in her mouth, too. She sighed as magic settled into her and her strong connection to Arcadia began to rebuild her body. Less and Simon had seen such a reaction only to goblin fruits with known healing properties, not simple fruits that were more known as snacks and sources of glamour. It seemed that the nymph had found a way to, or had adapted to, living in the Hedge and from the bounty of the Hedge. From any goblin fruit, she could not only subsist and make use of any special property of the fruit, but also use it to power her magic and heal her body. It was a useful trait in someone who was less adept at harvesting emotions than her peers. Yet, it was well known that all such abilities came with a price paid up front or forever more, whether she knew it or not.

"This is a perfectly nice floor," Rey said, "good for all kinds of things." Mizuko's wandering around didn't sound normal to her. Could Veridia have done something? Or could this be a result of the strain from the changes to Mizuko's life?

"It will be a better floor after we mop up all the blood," Simon said. "But I'll admit it was okay for emergency surgery."

Mizuko frowned and sat up, careful to keep a hand pressed to the still-open wound in her belly. "*I am sorry, Rey.*" She raised her hands and gathered her reserves of magic, and the blood answered her call. Rather, the water that made up most of the blood answered her call, and took the particles, red cells, and all the parts that made it blood along with it. Streams of blood came together in lump that slowly rippled at her feet. She pointed toward the kitchen, and the blood ball swiftly streaked to the other room, streamed up the cupboard and splashed itself down the drain. It did not remove the faint stains from where it had begun to dry, but it helped and the rest could be more easily removed.

Mizuko followed the blood to the kitchen, careful to move slowly, and turned on the faucet and directed the

stream to the floor where she'd lain. It pooled and swirled like a well-trained pet, scrubbing as best it could at remaining stains and spots.

While the water did the work, Mizuko found a chair and sank down in it. She still looked greenish — a very unhealthy color for the nymph — and ill. She occasionally directed some of it back into the sink, and refreshed the water by directing clean water from the faucet.

Less put "Well, if you think of what it was you lost," said Less to Mizuko. "We'll certainly help you look." It couldn't be a good thing that she felt like she was being drawn back into the Hedge. It may have been overly callous of him to blow off her concerns about the changes in her life when she came to him after the ordeal with the doctor.

He returned the mop he had found to clean the floor and brushed helplessly at the blood-stained knees of his trousers. "You're probably feeling the effects of the poisoned water of your pool. I noticed a new nest of some kind in the trees on the cliff. The rest of us should get back to see what we're dealing with - and check on Ollie and Auriel."

"You guys go," Simon said. He was a little torn since they'd left the Sprite in quite a hurry. The otter, too, for that matter. But he could only be in one place at a time. "I'm going to finish healing Mizuko, and we'll catch up."

"Rey, do you have any binoculars or a telescope of some kind?" asked Less. "I'd like to get a closer look at the nest."

Rey shook her head. "I'm afraid not. I have a rifle scope - but it's not here." It was back in Eldon Well with her Fetch. Along with everything else from her life before she was Taken.

Rover waved that minor detail aside as a non-issue.

"Stop by my lab. In five minutes, I'll have you zooming in on the face of the moon if you want. That stuff's easy."

Rey, Less, and Rover returned to the Hollow, leaving Simon alone with Mizuko. As soon as the others were gone, Mizuko let out a quiet sigh and slumped a little more in her chair. She signed sluggishly, "I don't feel well." Magic that sustained her and kept her on her feet far longer than she had any right to drained away, leaving her drawn and feeling her discomfort far more deeply than she had been.

Simon moved over to kneel by the chair. "You've been poisoned. I don't know what I can do about it," he said. "I'm going to start by healing you up as much as I can, and then we'll have to get some help. If I could, I'd have you on intravenous fluids and be giving you a full blood transfusion, but since it happened in the Hedge, I don't know if that would even work."

Simon guided his magic and will into the nymph, gently and perfectly healing all traces of the bullet wound but for a faintly purplish bruise. Mizuko looked impressed and was about to express her thanks, when a convulsion seized her by surprise. She rushed to the kitchen sink and vomited black liquid and lumps of something unpleasant. She choked for a while and continued to heave long after there was anything left in her stomach. She looked sick as hell, sweating and pale and shaking. She splashed water on her face, rinsed her mouth and then dried off with a towel. She tossed the towel onto the counter and then turned around, and then leaned on the counter for support.

"Okay, I believe you about the poison," she signed. "It's like the flu only ten times worse."

Simon hurried over to help. "Let's get you to the couch," he said. As he was helping the Siren, he tried to think of who might be able to help. He had contact numbers for a few of the Rose Council, but he didn't really know their magical specialties. Max was the one who seemed to know everyone, so he might be the best to call.

If Contracts would serve here at all. Simon realized his very limited medical knowledge might be stretched further to keep Mizuko alive. Once Mizuko was as comfortable as he could make her, he poured another glass of water for her and looked for something to use as a basin since she might throw up again. "Would any of the Autumn Court you're friendly with know anything about Hedge-poisons?"

Mizuko shook her head and smiled wanly. "I need to think a moment, Simon."

She knew that whatever was happening to her, she'd had a rather severe string of bad luck. She didn't believe in coincidence, and she knew very well that fate could be twisted and knotted up by a talented fae, such as a changeling, quite effectively. Surviving getting shot in the stomach and then poisoned possibly to death all in the same day seemed like too much to consider it an accident. Call it paranoia, but she was beginning to get the impression someone was trying to bump her off.

There were a number of ways to do it. Complex planning would have been necessary to pull off what happened to her today if a killer was to do it conventionally. But the fae didn't have to use conventional means, did they? They could just give things a push in the right direction, things that were set in motion already. Add a bit of magic and poof! Instant tragedy. And it would be difficult in the extreme to pin the death on the guilty party since it was all done through unwitting proxies.

There were any number of reasons why, as well. Maybe bumping her off would serve an example or threat to Rey or Less. Maybe a jealous court rival wanted her out of the way. That was something she could think about later, though. Right now she had to figure out a solution to this poisoning or she knew that she was a dead woman. What she'd thrown up had too much blood. She knew enough about poisons herself to know that the symptoms she had were a very bad sign. She doubted she could last more than a day or two, even with Simon's healing and a pile of goblin fruit to repair the damage the poison is wrecking throughout her body.

She looked up at Simon with grim eyes and decided not to tell him what she was thinking. If her fear was just paranoia, then all it would do was cause him to think her crazy. If her fears were correct, then it needed to be dealt with later anyway. Right now she had to beat the poison.

She signed to him, "I know some things about Hedge-poisons. More importantly I know quite a lot about goblin fruit and which fruits cure what poison. Less might know a thing or two, but I doubt he's aware of the occult uses of many of them. But first we have to know what poisoned me. Without that information, there isn't anyone that can help us. We've got to go find the others. I need to return to the Hollow."

"Okay," Simon said. That had been about the third item on his list anyway. "I was hoping to find an expert who wasn't actually suffering from the poison, but I guess you'll be more motivated than anyone else we could ask. Where do you stow your clothes here? I'll grab you a clean shirt and we can go."

She smiled and gave him a look, then shook her head. She got up and made her way past a door into the entryway, and then disappeared into what must have been a sitting room. She closed the door behind her, and Simon didn't get much of a look inside other than a futon and small wardrobe. She'd been learning some things about modesty, apparently, from Rey. She returned in a minute wearing something simple, black and sleeveless. They then made their way back through Rey's new Door, leading to the Hollow. Since Simon didn't sense any magic coming from Mizuko, she must have done something to trigger a Key of some kind.

—

Rover made a side stop at his workshop and went to work modifying pieces of glass and tubes. In short order, he came up with an over-complicated contraption that seemed to fill the role of spyglass reasonably well.

"Where'd you see that nest?" Rey asked Less.

"Up there, in the Hedge trees," said Less, pointing to the spot.

Rey looked from the spot to the pool.

They all three finally spotted it and then took a look with the spyglass. It was a huge nest, big enough for a person to live inside. And, something dark was moving around in it.

Less pulled the glass away from his eye, wracking his brains for something that would tell him what this was. "Has anyone seen anything like this before?"

Rover took possession of the rickety device and put his eye to the receiver cup. A cross expression dropped across his face as he reached into his pocket for a small screwdriver. Rapid, multiple adjustments were made in a frustrated mood.

The lack of time had kept him from properly mounting any shock-absorbing stabilizers. That meant the telescope really wasn't fit for any kind of rough handling or even movement over long distances. What had produced perfect focus in the lab was now all out of alignment... plus someone had managed to get a fingerprint on an internal lens. Rover wasn't even sure how that was possible.

He had it working to his own satisfaction in a few moments, though less demanding viewers may not have even noticed the minor shortcomings. Rover was a bit more demanding of his own products.

Now that everything seemed to be in place, he made a serious examination of the structure. It was big enough to provide a heavily defended (with the dense thorns of the tree in which it was built) home for something at least as big as a human. Given the distance it was from the ground, the occupant most certainly was capable of flight.

That fact, combined with the fouling of the spring, made something click in Rover's mind. The name "vileshrike" came to mind. It was something he'd overheard others talking of sometime ago. He hadn't paid close attention as he was busy building something on contract, but he remembered what had been said nonetheless. His mind was a virtual sponge for just about any kind of tidbit he may have overheard over the years.

A vileshrike was a creature that combine human and avian features in the most unpleasant way imaginable. The creatures, like most Hedge creatures, were not uniform in appearance. Some had different human features, or multiple vulture heads, or weird configurations of human and avian. But they could all fly, they had talons and vicious beaks, and a horrendous sense of taste and cleanliness. The creature stank, wallowed in their own filth and tended to spread it around their territories in a way to mark them theirs. They fed on rotten meat, but they didn't wait around for something to die — they usually killed it themselves, eviscerated it, and left it to rot a few days until the stink was intolerably ripe. Such filthy creatures' talons strikes and bites were always deadly infectious. The only good thing he'd heard about them was that they were so vile, they didn't even tolerate each other. Thus, a vileshrike was almost always found alone.

As Rover stared at the dark shape moving about in the nest thinking of what he knew of the horrible thing, a cool hand touched his shoulder, making him jump nearly out of his skin. Whirling in place, he found himself face to chest with Mizuko, who was back on her feet, but looked sick as a dog. Simon stood also at her side,

watching her carefully.

Rover allowed relief to wash over his dour expression and nodded at her. That was about as close to a welcome-back hug as the emotionally withdrawn gnome normally came, but anyone with the power to read his mind would have been struck with the release of inner tension.

"It's a Vileshrike." He directed attention back towards their new nemesis. "Filthy, deadly carcass eaters with no redeeming qualities. I'd like to try digging it out with high explosives, but I think that'd just make things worse. Blowing something that disease-ridden across a half-mile radius would do us about as much good as it would the target.

"That makes another fine mess we've gotten ourselves into. Any ideas on how to clean it up?"

"That could explain how the pond got poisoned - it might have dropped something in it," Rey said with a frown. "How about the net guns? Think we can use them to trap the thing?"

"Doubtful." Rover shook his head. "Maybe if we can get it outside of the nest for a clean shot. But even then, it's got talons and a pretty sharp beak that'd cut through the net in no time. Plus it'd still be able to throw some nasty scratches around, and that's all it'd take for infection to set in.

"If you want to trap it, then some of that super-expanding insulation foam might be a better idea."

"Why would we want to trap it?" Mizuko signed at Rey.

"Given what Rover's told us about the thing," Rey replied, "getting in close would be a bad thing. I have no problem shooting fish in a barrel if it will keep us safe."

"Unless we need to drink out of that barrel and the fish is full of toxic waste." Rover reminded. "Getting rid of it without knocking its own filth in to the water is what we should be going for."

Simon borrowed the spyglass and got a glimpse at the bird. He mused out loud on his thoughts. "Climbing up there is a sucker's game. I'd think the easiest things to do would be to either lure it down with some bait and then everyone kill the hell out of it, or get Rey a hunting rifle and have her shoot it. No waiting period on those, so it shouldn't be too hard.

"We could try weird stuff instead; go all Wiley Coyote on its ass, but that might just be overcomplicating the problem." That was all outside Simon's area of expertise. Better to let the experts hash out the answer. But knowing what the vileshrike was put a different spin on Mizuko's problem. He handed the glass back to Rover so he could turn to address her.

"If it's infection, rather than poison, antibiotics might help you," he said. "But the onset seems really fast for that. Most infections would take at least a few hours to kick in. Even with your severe exposure, you've been exposed for less than an hour."

Mizuko nodded. "I need samples to make a cure." Since the infection originated in the Hedge, she knew she would need to tap occult knowledge to find a cure.

"I might be able to find some info about it, or even how to make a cure," Rey added, "but I don't know how long it would take." Her newly formed association with the Lord Sages might lead her to someone who could help, but she wasn't sure. "In any case, Mizuko, I'll help you any way I can. We also need to keep in mind that the vileshrike might not be the cause. Could you use the water from the pond to create a cure?"

Mizuko thought about that before she answered. A convulsion emanating from her belly nearly made her double over, but she held herself taugnt and erect. But her face went grey for a moment before color

returned. "Maybe. I'm not sure if it will be too diluted or not. Since I don't have much time, and the components could take a lot of time to collect, I'd rather not wait to find out."

"That eliminates most complicated plans," Simon said, giving Mizuko a look of concern. "We're back to the plan of baiting it down here... ground level, I mean, not necessarily right in our back yard, unless someone has another idea."

"We need the net guns, or something else to keep it from flying around. If it gets airborne, we're toast." Rey looked up at the nest. "And if it gets away...." She knew she didn't need to explain how bad that would be.

"I might be able to drum up a strong wind that might help hamper it's flight," said Less. "I have a good mind to trick it into going through a Gate into the mortal world and let Reality deal with it, but then it might be hard to get a sample of the poison. I guess the best bet is to arm ourselves and try to kill it quickly."

"I'd rather it be grounded, where it's more vulnerable." Rey spoke from experience, and the motley needed every advantage they could get. She glanced at the pool - getting it tangled up in the nets and then drowning it sounded good to her, but that might cause more problems. "Do any of you have a way to immobilize it?"

"Besides limiting it's ability to fly and the netgun, no." said Less.

"Nope," Simon said. "What about you, Auriel? Helping us take down that bird would be a big deal. Maybe enough to cancel your pledge-debt." He looked to the Siren for confirmation since she knew more about pledgecraft than he.

Auriel wasn't anywhere visible when the motley members appeared, but she flitted into view after he called her name. "Hmm?" she said.

After Simon explained he wanted her to help take out the vileshrike, she looked puzzled. "I am no warrior, master. What exactly do you want me to do about it?"

"Sorry, I shouldn't just assume you're waiting around for my merest command." The irony of that statement wasn't lost on Simon. "We need to lure the vileshrike up in that nest down here so we can kill it. I wondered if you might be able to help us lure it down. We'll do the fighting. If you have powers to confuse it or befuddle it's senses, and if you think you can keep from getting eaten, it'd be a big help."

She blinked at Simon. "Normally I use whatever is necessary *not* to get such predators' attention. If I get it's attention I will probably be eaten. But I will do as you ask, master. Perhaps by some stroke of luck you will get it first. By the way," she added, "the water of the Hollow Spring is not suitable for drinking. If you need something to drink, I can bring you something. Unless of course, I am dead."

Simon reminded himself, again, that Auriel wasn't human and didn't think like a human, and that he wouldn't convince her he didn't want to be her master until she really wasn't a slave. "Thank you. I had a coke earlier," he said a little wryly. "I don't want to lose you while I'm trying save Mizuko, so we'll have to try something else."

While Simon talked to Auriel, Rey spoke softly to Rover. "How quickly could you rig something up rifle-like for me?"

"Put a round right between its eyes, sure." The gnome spoke, putting aside his natural pacifism for the needs of prudence. "But don't think for a minute it'll be helpless on the ground."

"Sure, it won't be able to dive bomb us with filth and stones, but the bastard's half human and is likely to just as deadly on its feet as on the wing. Maybe we'll get lucky and it'll break a leg when the nets bring it down."

"I know it won't be helpless," Rey said patiently, "but I'm hoping on the ground it won't be as maneuverable - and won't be able to divebomb us. So, can you pull something together in about 15 minutes?"

Rover indicated to the negative.

"Then we need to find something else to." Rey looked around for anything they might be able to quickly modify into weapons.

Amongst building materials she found hammers, nails, saws and various building materials of a non-mechanical and non-powered nature. (Complex and modern tools had a tendency to break down frequently in the Hedge, and of course power was unavailable.) There were also bags, cut straps, and crates. Apart from that, vines crept up the natural features of the spring and, where Rover didn't cut them back, even over the new construction.

Mizuko walked slowly down to the edge of her pool and looked at it longingly, then sat down next to the edge without touching it. Oliver hopped sadly over next to her and put his head in her lap.

"Okay," Simon said. "How about, like, a crossbow or something? It would only have to hold together for two or three shots." He went to sit next to Mizuko and said "You probably shouldn't get into the fight, but if we can douse the shriek with water, are you up to freezing it?"

She shook her head and signed in return, "My power doesn't work the way you think it does. A thin sheet water flash frozen will wake them up or turn them off to sex quickly but will not slow them in the least. You'd have to submerge them and then I'd need to somehow freeze and entire block of ice to immobilize them. But that would also most certainly asphyxiate the victim as well. If you want to freeze someone in place, you must speak with a scion of Winter." She nodded to Less. "Do not worry, Simon. If you and the others cannot handle the creature, I will save you." She smiled at him despite her obvious illness.

"Curse you, comic books! You lied to me!" Simon said, comically shaking his fist at the sky. Then he reached over to hug Mizuko and kiss the side of her head. "Glad you've got our backs."

Mizuko smiled at the contact and kept her face brave despite her situation.

Rey cast her eye over the vines that intertwined themselves along the cliff face. She found one with leaves that clung to anything that brushed against them. With a smile, she grasped hold of one and tried to shape it into a whip. Her first attempt failed, but on her second try, the end of the vine separated from rest, its leaves curling up and becoming like a series of large nodules along its length. She gave it a tentative crack, then smiled.

Rover, on the other hand, was not quite as comfortable with close combat. A footman's lance seemed like an obvious weapons to construct from the materials at hand, but the little gnome wanted better distance from the target. He cast around for the appropriate basics and started putting together a compound bow.

His limited strength and stature would make the archery rig less effective than he liked, but it might let him bring down an airborne opponent in the absence of their net guns. Or, at least he hoped. There were a few magical tricks he could use to maximize the effectiveness of such a crude build. Hopefully it would be enough to do the trick.

Less cursed himself for not picking up the netguns while they were in Rover's workshop not minutes before. He shook his head in mild disgust. "I'll run and get the netguns. Try not to attract its attention until I get back!"

"*There is no time left for that,*" Mizuko said. She pointed at the dark form that had launched itself into the air at the sound of the whip's crack. Even now, the large, winged shape hurtled through the air, gaining altitude as if launched from a canon. It wheeled once, and set itself a course directly over and above the motley's current position.

"*Ah well. I figured it wasn't going to just sit and wait for us to kill it,*" Mizuko concluded.

Less called on his control of the air. Focusing intently on the flying creature he tumbled his arms around in front of him to cause as much downward moving turbulence as he could. The vileshrike's wings were too powerful, though, and it swept through without so much as a shudder.

"Ghaa!" Simon was totally unprepared. He scrambled to his feet and ran to the bag he'd brought with him, digging into a side pocket for his pistol.

The vileshrike hurtled toward the group and Rover took his shot, hurling the spear with all the accuracy he could muster. But his shot whistled past the vileshrike's shoulder and it dove in to rake the gnome, leaving bloody marks in its path. It swept on by with a triumphant screech.

Less redoubled his efforts to ground the hideous bird-thing with a powerful down-draught.

Simon triumphantly pulled out his pistol. But as much as he thought it'd be cool to pump hot lead into the monster, he knew he wasn't the best one to try. "Rover, Gun!" he said. Then he sprinted back toward the wounded gnome to let him use the pistol. A mechanical device in Rover's hands was probably going to be a lot more effective than in Simon's.

Simon gave Rover's wounds a cursory look, but decided that the gnome could survive for a little while longer, especially if the others could ground the 'shrike. But if Simon could keep the 'shrike away from Rover, that'd be good. So he invoked his rights under the second clause of Fleeting Spring in a subtle way. Making the 'shrike want to surrender or even just leave would probably be too far from its true desire, but making the 'shrike decide it just had to kill the oh-so-pretty guy with the gold fur... that might work. And maybe Simon would be light enough on his feet to avoid being skewered, sliced, or poisoned.

Simon knew his magic must have worked because while the vileshrike shrieked in frustration at the wind storm Less called up, its all too human eyes switched from Rover and Less to Simon.

With a rapid swing of her arm, Rey sent the tip of her Hedge-whip at the vileshrike. "Less, try to force it down into the pond!" If the creature was wet, she reasoned, it might not be able to fly. And the pond was already poisoned, so hopefully dunking the thing won't put the water past reclamation.

Rey's whip crack raked the vileshrike's back and it screeched in pain and rage. It switched its attention to Rey, but then Rover had an opening for a shot and he took it. Now armed with Simon's pistol, he took aim and squeezed off a shot nice and easy. The only thing that saved it from a swift death was that it was in motion, and it was difficult for Rover to spot vitals amid the muck-encrusted feathers.

Between Less's wind and the pain that Rey and Rover were dealing it plus Simon's distraction, the creature had to make a split second decision to eliminate the one that was hurting it the most so that it could go after the one it wanted the most. It wheeled tightly, dropped to the ground and slashed viciously at Rey. It caught only air.

Perhaps it missed because Mizuko was suddenly at Rey's side, shoving her out of the way. "*A deal is a deal, changeling,*" Mizuko told Rey. "*I will not allow harm to come to you by your enemies.*" Mizuko remained standing between the shrike and Rey, pale and shivering, but standing.

Less directed the wind to snatch up debris and water from the pond, wrapping itself in a whirlwind around the creature to inhibit its vision and hopefully misdirect it into the water. The creature staggered toward the edge of the pond under Less's stormy direction.

Simon snatched up Rover's spear and tried to attack the bird-thing. He might not be much of a fighter, but he could at least keep it distracted. A few swift stabs didn't catch the bird-thing, but it did force it another hop toward the water.

Rey glanced at Mizuko but said nothing; now was not the time to be arguing about it. She lifted her whip and sent the tip flying at the vileshrike. She scored another hit against the thing, eliciting more shrieks of pain. It staggered unsteadily beneath the motley's assault.

The gun felt strange and warm in Rover's hand. This wasn't the first time he'd used one, of course, but most of his experience was in development. He'd had rare opportunities to use the weapons for their given purpose. Firing upon another living creature was not a casual event for the gnome.

But it was a tool just like any other. Perhaps a little more primitive and brutal than he was used to, but well suited for the immediate task. He could appreciate that. Sometimes there was little better in life than handling a well crafted implement that was performing its one and only job in life.

Moving only as much as was required to not hit any of the others, Rover lined up for another shot. He continued to ignore the wings and went for another killshot. While the slugs coming from the gun could do a great deal of damage, they'd likely not cause enough destruction to ground the vileshrike. Better to simply exterminate the pest before it could cause any further harm.

The blast from the pistol blew through the middle of the vileshrike and opened a gaping wound right out the back. Black blood spewed forth along with gobbits of unidentifiable sludge and then the bird-man collapsed.

Less released his control of the air with a relieved sigh. He let the flying debris tumble down behind the monster in the hope it would briefly stop the flow of more poison into the pond. "Quickly Simon, can you extract the venom?"

"Um... no," Simon said. Truthfully, he had no idea what part of the carcass Mizuko needed. "But I can help pull it out of the pond." Grabbing his work gloves, Simon started to do just that.

Mizuko waved to get Simon's attention, then signed, "Collect a few feathers. They are covered in the same muck. It's likely a combination of feces, urine, and decaying animal matter. That will do. Then let me see them." She sat down again, as she felt faint and feverish. The poison inside her was slowly turning her guts to an infectious mush and she knew it. The pain was horrible, but she made no sound and sat patiently.

As soon as he'd pulled the dead shrike to shore, Simon did so and brought the handful of feathers he'd yanked out over to Mizuko. "Your muck-encrusted feathers, milady," he said, presenting them with a flourish.

Mizuko peered at them without touching them. She didn't have gloves, then chewed her lip in thought.

"Is there anything else we can do to help?" asked Less as he gingerly approached the dead thing for a closer look. "Or should we just begin collecting firewood to burn this thing?" His security-conscious mind wasn't looking forward to the giant plume of foul, black smoke it was going to give off. He would have to see what he could do about dispersing the smoke before some hobs decided it marked a Hollow ready for pillaging.

Mizuko eyed Less in disbelief. She signed, "Firing guns here is bad enough. Do you really think we ought to also send up a smoke signal in case any of the True Fae within thirty leagues hadn't already heard us? We wouldn't want them to be late for the party we are evidently throwing." She shook her head and sighed. Honestly, the sound of the bullets shouldn't have traveled far, given the thickness and density of the Hedge.

A smoky fire was something else entirely, however. The nymph managed a delicate snort. "Drag it off into the Hedge with you when you go."

Less looked up at the cliffs surrounding the pool doubtfully. Getting a diseased man-sized bird-thing out into the Hedge was far easier said than done.

"I'm afraid the vilesrike was the easy part," Mizuko continued to sign. "The shrike has no fangs so this isn't a conventional poisoning. Instead it's more like a faery-powered infection caused by its habits. If you look at its talons, I'm sure you find more diseased crud. Which reminds me. Rover, you should let me look at those scratches. If you are as lucky as I, you could have an infection as well."

"What can I do to help?" Rey asked.

"A fae disease is completely beyond the ability of a mortal's body to heal because it is born of magic. Luckily, changelings are not really mortal anymore. Not in the human sense," Mizuko signed. "Or I might already be dead. My body is trying to fight off the infection, but I will still die unless we have the right magic to counter it. And Rover too, if he's been infected as well. I think I know what will help, but it will not be easy to get. You will have to find three Hedge plants. I can give you some ideas on where to find two of the them, but the third is something I read about in my occult studies of the Hedge with the Court. I think it's what we need, but I can't tell you where to find it; it's that rare. Because of the danger you could face trying to find these things, I think you should all go together. I can stay here and make ready what I will need to prepare the herbs."

Less nodded attentively. "Best give Rey the names, what they might be known as by the locals, and as detailed a description as possible. If she gives us all a sketch of what we're looking for we might be able to recognize it easier."

Simon had notecards and a pencil in his bag. He added those to the effort. He'd also brought lunch and some hardware Rover had asked him to pick up. For now, the bag was probably going to be more valuable to hold the herbs the group needed to find. So Simon emptied it of tools, fasteners, sandwiches, chips, and cookies (the molasses kind with white cream icing).

"I feel healthy as a horse." Rover insisted, though there was at least a tinge of doubt in his voice. "But I'm not the kind to just hope for the best. Let's stop yapping about it and go find what 'Zuko needs, fast."

Mizuko described three goblin fruits. The first was valeburrow. This was the root of a plant that grew in places of the Hedge where things had died fairly recently. The root would be pale and covered in a kind of slippery sap, but when pulled from the ground or corpse it was found it, would be clean. Next she asked for leaves from the raincup plant. They would recognize it as a large plant that can catch rainwater. She warned that other hedge creatures know this and use them as drinking holes. However, the leaves have a purifying effect on the water and she needed those to purify the brew she would make. Finally, she said the most dangerous goblin fruit to collect would be the bloodwort. The fruit from this tree was very rare but it had the power to purify blood in the right application. She warned it should not be eaten raw and that this tree tended to be dangerous and capable of defending itself.

"Please take all you can carry of the first two items when you find them," Mizuko signed to her motley mates. "They can be used to purify the spring."

"Let's grab some backpacks and shovels and head out. I should talk to the Wretched Doorward to see if she knows of any likely places to start looking. I won't be long."

After Less left, the remaining members of the motley were left to their own preparations.

"Have fun," Simon said. "Try to bring back some random thing you'd never expect to have a use for. It'll

probably be important. Today has been that kind of day. And take a sandwich." Then he turned to Rover and got serious. "Come here and I'll clean out those cuts and see about healing them. If we're going into the Hedge, we don't want to be dripping blood everywhere."

Less had no difficulty contacting the Wretched Doorward, who had some recommendations to locating the unusual goblin fruit. The valeburrow and raincup would be found perhaps near paths and in small clearings. They were uncommon but not rare. The bloodwort was something she hadn't heard of before, and could be something rare that existed off any regular paths, making it potentially dangerous to harvest. She suggested that if he was willing to pay a fae price for such fruit, he might find it at the goblin market — or perhaps from the Emerald Queen's garden.

After a while Less hurried through the Door next to the pool. As Simon had instructed, his pocket was bulging with cellophane-wrapped sandwiches from the station vending machine. He also had a box under his arm about 9 inches to a side, wrapped in brown paper and tied with string. After it had been left behind on the platform, it had been shot through by the shotgun-wielding bomb-diffusing robot. When it didn't explode, it had been carelessly left near Lost and Found.

He didn't bother with preamble. "Sounds like we have a good chance of finding valeburrow and raincup along the way to finding bloodwort. Simon, have you been to the Emerald Queen's garden? And if so, can you think if you saw bloodwort there?"

"I've heard she might have one," Simon said, "But I've never seen it. I could ask her. Queen Cassandra is likely to be fairly reasonable, if she has what we need. Bloodwort sounds pretty rare, though. Somebody let me through Rey's door and I'll give her a call."

"You can get through the Door without any help," Rey said. "The Key is being a member of our motley."

"Handy," Simon said. "Keeps out the riff-raff." He went to make his phone call.

"Hello Simon," answered a female voice Simon didn't recognize. Whoever it was had a sexy voice and paid attention to caller id.

"Hello," Simon said. "I'm afraid you have the advantage of me. I need to speak with Queen Cassandra if she's available." He paused, unsure what was safe to say to a stranger. "I'm seeking her expertise in an urgent matter."

"Not yet, I don't," said the woman, her voice silky and full mischief. It took a moment but Simon realized she was referring to his mention that she had the advantage.

As he puzzled out what to say, he heard a muffled voice in the background, then the speaker sighed. "Very well. I suppose you can have her for the moment."

Next Cassandra's voice was on the line. "Yes, Simon. Is there something you need?"

Cassandra, Simon had heard, was a lover of women. "I hope I didn't interrupt anything important," he said.

"You didn't," the Queen interjected.

"One of my friends has been infected with a toxin from the Hedge. She needs a certain goblin fruit to cure her of the infection. I've heard that you keep a goblin fruit garden. If that's true, then I'm hoping you can help us get what we need without having to go traipsing through the Hedge to find it."

"That depends, Simon. What exactly are you looking for?" she asked.

Simon consulted his notecard. "The one I'm worried about is bloodwort," he said. "We also need valeburrow roots and raincup leaves, but bloodwort is rare *and* dangerous to harvest."

The phone was silent while the Queen considered. "So I have heard. I have valeburrow and raincup at hand and I could gain access to bloodwort, but the price is steep. The tree bears fewer than a handful of fruit, most times none at all. It is highly valued and in great demand if it can be found. You risk your life to seek it in the Hedge."

"My friend will die if we don't get it, and it'll be an ugly death," Simon said. "And I'd guess that we only have a few hours. Certainly less than a day. You said you could get access. Do you mean going to the Thirteenth Street Market? Or to someone else? And how interested are you in building some good will with the Autumn Court? Because the friend I'm trying to help is Mizuko Naia." His heart crawled up into his throat for the last, because it was a gamble. Cassandra didn't seem the sort to hold grudges or pass up an opportunity out of spite and pride, or the sort to let someone suffer and die if she could help it, but if Simon was wrong about her...

He hoped she'd help, both for Mizuko and for Cassandra. The way Simon saw it, the antagonism between Autumn and the other two courts was unhealthy for the whole Duchy. It only promised to lead to further strife when the Duchy needed to be united. If Queen Cassandra saved the new Herald of Autumn, she'd be laying groundwork for reconciliation.

The Queen laughed lightly. "I think you might be disappointed if you really thought Autumn would be grateful for a gift they did not ask for. They are a ruthless people, Simon. But I understand your concern for your... friend? Special friend, maybe? Clearly you are willing to risk a lot for her, even risk angering me with your well-meaning but misguided attempt to gain my assistance. That in itself has piqued my interest so I'll bargain with you. Answer me my questions and I will answer yours.

"Me first. Is this Mizuko Naia your lover?"

Simon knew this was one of the games the fae played. If Simon chose to answer, then he accepted the invitation to the play the game. However, the game offered is her game and although the rules had been set, she would choose when it ended. Although the game was offered in friendly terms, something about it made Simon's small hairs stand on end.

Dangerous to proceed, Simon knew, but a trip into the Hedge would be more dangerous, and less likely to succeed. "Not at present," he said after a moment to consider. "To acquire the Bloodwort, would you have to trade with someone?"

"No. You would because it carries a price I cannot pay. Since she is not a lover, yet someone you value greatly to sacrifice in order save her life, might you be able to persuade her to leave Autumn for Spring?"

"Anything is possible," Simon answered, "But that would be unlikely, and not likely to end well. If I trade for the bloodwort, would it be with someone within the Desert Duchy?"

"No. You would deal with a hob guardian, with all that entails." Her implication was that she knew where such a tree grew and in this case she knew the creature could be dealt with rather than fought, though she did not specifically say so. "Final question. Would she do the same for you as you would do for her?"

"Yes," Simon said without hesitation. "But even if she wouldn't, I would try to help her." Then he had to think how to phrase his question. Simplicity, he decided, was best. "Will you tell me where I must go and what I must do to acquire the bloodwort?"

"Go to the 13th Street Market and see a hob named Blip Goretusk. He specializes in having the most up to date information on how to get around in the Hedge. The paths change, and the route to the bloodwort tree that worked for me may no longer work for you. Once you have that follow his instructions exactly and you will find the tree and the hobgoblin that guards it. Be warned — if you are granted access to the fruit once, you will never again be permitted another. At least, not without a fight."

"Thank you, your majesty. I will keep that in mind," Simon said. "If you don't mind one last question, who was the dulcet-voiced creature that answered your phone? I think I'd like to meet her after this business is all over."

The Queen laughed again, a teasing note to her voice. "Now Simon the game is over. Isn't that cheating?" But she proceeded to give Simon a friendly clue. "I think I'll let Jo decide whether to answer for herself, assuming her duties permit her the time."

"Your majesty is gracious and generous beyond measure," Simon said. "Please tell Jo I look forward to meeting her. But for now, I have to get back to the others. Thank you again."

The Queen made a dismissive sound. "Flattery of the right kind will get you everywhere, Simon. Just tell me how devastatingly gorgeous and sexy I am."

Simon started to say something, but she interrupted. "I'm joking, Simon. Well, not completely. Good luck." She hung up.

Simon went back through the Door to deliver the news. He found Less, Rey and Rover discussing how they were going to dispose of the vileshrike's body. Rover was using his new telescope to sight the cliff-top while describing the parabolic trajectory he could accomplish with a simple catapult. They all looked up expectantly when Simon arrived and listened eagerly to his news.

Less rubbed his chin and made a mental note to chide his Wardens for not being aware of hob Goretusk. Such a source of information was not to be overlooked in the future. "I guess we should mount the expedition for the bloodwort right away. Chances are we'll be able to harvest the other plants along the way."

"Hopefully," Rey said with a nod. "Give me a minute to run home and grab some containers to put these things in." She paused for a moment and looked around. "Maybe we could grab some of the living plants and see about setting up our own garden here."

Mizuko looked up at Rey. "That will not be easy. It requires time and sacrifice of blood, body, mind, or soul for those fruit with special properties and it is difficult to know which of those is appropriate. It can be worth the effort, but it is not like growing string beans and watermelon. It's not a casual project."

The nymph stood up with deliberate care. "If you are going to make a deal with one of the fae, maybe I should go with you."

"I don't like the idea of dragging you through the Hedge," Simon said. "But you might be important to have along. What about the preparations you were going to make here? Will that time be better spent getting ready, or finding the fruit? Because I can do okay haggling with a Hob if I have to."

"No, you are right. My time is better spent here," Mizuko signed. "I meant just to the goblin market. I leaped to the conclusion that since you'll need information from this Blip person, you'll have to pay for that too. I know you may have to pay dearly for the bloodwort at the tree and I feel bad for having to trouble you all with it. I just want to make the burden I put on you lighter."

Simon stepped over to Mizuko and reached for her hands. "We'll be okay," he said. "This is what family

does. You need to stay here. You're one of the strongest people I know, but right now you need to let us take care of you, so you'll be there to take care of us later on." He leaned close to give her a chaste kiss on the cheek and then released her hands. "I can manage Blip on my own. I don't have your skills, but I get by."

"Should she stay here or at Less' place?" Rover interrupted the display. "We've already had one unexpected visitor and I still don't have the security system running, yet. His Hollow seemed a little more private than this one, but I don't know if you'll be able to do what needs to get done there."

"I have what I need here," Mizuko signed, then she sighed and withdrew her hands. "I will stay."

As the others spoke, Rey had run back to her place and grabbed a number of plastic bags and containers, along with some old towels in case they needed fabric, and tossed them all into a backpack. Still clad in her suit from work, an arcane symbol was woven into her fae mien and appeared on the left shoulder of her suit. This was something the others hadn't seen before, though it was not the only change in her mien they now noticed - her eyes had become slightly larger than they were before and now glowed.

Less opened the Door to his Hollow. "We can pick up the net guns on the way to the Market. Anything else you need from your shop, Rover?"

"Can't think of anything." Rover admitted. "Just a decent, traveling toolkit. If I knew what we might be trading, I could try to whip something up. As it is, though..."

The gnome finished off with a shrug. Trying to anticipate the desires of a shred merchant was beyond his abilities to divine.

Simon picked up his now empty toolbag and grabbed some of the lunch he'd brought. "I keep a spare change of clothes in the car," he said. "I'll just grab a clean shirt and be ready to go." But first he thought of one other thing to do. "Hey Aurelia," he called, "Please stay with Mizuko and help her out, okay?"

He didn't hear a response, but Mizuko signed, "I think she has already gone to find some clean water for me to begin boiling. Good luck, all of you."

—

Entering the 13th Street market always felt like slumming. There had to be entrances to it somewhere on the Hedge side, but they weren't known to the motley. So, they had to go down to the rundown section of town over which an Interstate Highway ran. Thirteenth street passed under it and it was beneath this bridge where a maze of shacks ran so close together they made a labyrinth of homeless people and stray animals. Once they threaded through the throng of depressed, cast-off humanity they found themselves in spooky corridors that burrowed deep into the ground that even the most self-destructive avoided. People disappeared down here and those above knew it. Those below took advantage of it.

Finally at the market, the group found themselves surrounded by the fae menagerie. While there were all manner of goblins about, few took any interest in the changelings. However, there was one who watched them enter. He was a squinting, twisted tree-looking little hob with black beady eyes that peered out at them under thick, green brows.

The ugly little man wasn't much to look at though, and what caught Simon's eye was a female fae who was both disturbing and difficult not to look at. She was attractive, but in all the wrong ways. She was tall and thin, but not skinny. All she wore were thin, silvery chains that wound down her arms and draped across her body. They were attached securely to her skin, and in many places seemed to run *through* her flesh. Her fingers bore hard, black claws instead of nails and as she spoke, her perfect lips revealed prominent, vicious-looking eye teeth.

Meanwhile, Less noted that the tree-like hob had several items for sale. Handcrafted leather pouches each decorated with imprints in a variety of styles and dyed green, blue, black, yellow, and brown hung from a stand atop a table.

Rey made note of where the stall was located, and the look of the goblin manning it. The pouches caught her attention, but she wanted to have time to inspect them at leisure if she was going to make a purchase.

Simon recalled a hob with whom he'd done business before and who'd been pleased enough with the deal that Simon felt sure the hob would lend them the needed information. Simon said as much to the others, and they proceeded past the curious tree-hob and threaded their way deeper into the market's maze of vendors.

Simon stopped at a stall which sold aphrodisiacs, memories, wishes, and desires. The vendor was a creature that looked like a misshapen old woman. She had one eye that was obviously much bigger than the other, a huge, crooked nose and wore a ragged, dirty white dress. She sat hunched over almost to her belly and had a hump that moved and shuddered beneath her stringy shawl. She pursed her lips and grinned toothlessly.

After greeting Simon, he asked her where he might find Blip Goretusk and she gave him a knowing wink. Lipping for lack of teeth, she told him that Blip lurked near the north edge of the market and pointed him that direction. As they left, she caught Less's eye and smacked her lips in a weird kiss and blew it toward him, then winked that huge eye at him.

Less kept his head down and followed Simon closely. He preferred to go incognito and haggling for anything would draw attention to him. Besides, he didn't feel he could afford to buy anything, nor did he have the time to spare. He did try to keep an eye out for anyone else he might know. Presence at the Goblin Market was always good information to someone.

"This way, folks," Simon said, setting a course through the carts and stands that would take them where they wanted to go, but would keep them a comfortable distance from the slavers. That was a complication Simon didn't need today.

Rover made sure to stay close to the others, but stopped just short of hanging on to anyone's pantleg. Little guys tended to get lost in large crowds and the vibe of this one made him nervous. It was like being a salmon in a shark tank. So many hungry, greedy faces everywhere he looked.

But there were also a lot of interesting feats of engineering for sale. These took some effort to ignore, as he was always looking for new designs to compare and contrast with his own. They were on a mission, however, and he'd hate to get lost around here even if they weren't.

"Stick with me," Rey said softly to Rover in their motley's secret language and held out her hand. The gesture was genuine, an offer of security and not condescension or mockery. Having their grasp broken would be a much faster warning of something amiss.

The motley group threaded their way through the market, avoiding calls for them to come see the latest goods and offers for more esoteric things until they thought they were on what they expected to be the north side the market. That was near a large and busy slave block.

There was a scream and jumble of thumps that drew their attention to the block. There, a huge, yellow-skinned ogre dragged an insect-winged fairy girl back up to the block from the bottom of the steps by the chain that was attached to an iron collar around her neck. The skin where the collar touched her was so red and raw, it looked like it would bleed any moment. Her pale cheeks were streaked with tears and the poor thing wept and struggled against the collar and chain, even summoning some kind of wind and electric

magic to blast it away, but none of it had any effect on the cold iron. She was taller and more substantial than Auriel and her skin was a pale, metallic blue. Bright violet eyes fastened on Rey as the motley hurried by.

She was a sylph, Rey knew. This poor creature was a creature of Air as much as Mizuko, as a nymph, was a creature of Water. She was naked, her body battered and bruised, and she choked as she was dragged roughly across the wood deck of the slave block. She reached one, delicately clawed hand toward Rey while the other clutched at the cold iron collar and tugged at it to give her space to breath. "Help! Please help me!" she begged in a strangled voice.

Rey paused, unable to tear her eyes from the sylph. "Go," she said in the motley's Cant. "I have to see what I can do to free her. Less, better start thinking of ways to spin this if I end up as her owner."

Without waiting for her companions, she stepped closer to the slave block. She let the disgust she felt fill her eyes, but was certain the true reason for it was well hidden. "She doesn't look like much," she said aloud, then scanned the crowd to see who else might be interested in her.

Simon answered in the same language, "Iron collar, she's probably not bound to a pledge yet. If the ogre is dealing in cash, I can come up with quite a bit."

The creature next to her eyed her. It had a huge, heron-like head mounted atop hunched shoulders. He had wing-like arms and was covered in long feathers instead of clothes. It chortled. It gave her a mocking laugh. "That one is a changeling and a thief. Just like you."

"Outta the way, changeling," growled a gravelly voice. "I can't see." It came from a monkey man that grinned up at her when she looked to reveal teeth filed to points. He squirmed around her to the front of the block and peered at the hapless sylph.

Rover let the creature pass through and reflexively checked his own possessions as he did. This area was likely to be overflowing with pickpockets, and monkeys tended to have slender, narrow and dexterous fingers.

He continued to the conversation in the group's secret language.

"Iron collars have locks. Locks can be picked. We don't actually need cash or anything else if we can just come up with a good distraction."

Personally, he thought the mission to be yet another fool's errand. The market likely had as many slaves as it did pickpockets, and while he detested the existence of both he knew they'd hardly make a dent in the populace of either. No matter how many captives they freed, there would always be more. But the others seemed the type who bought lottery tickets and actually thought they had a chance of winning.

Some people just never seemed to truly grasp the odds of a thing.

"Stealing a slave," Rey murmured in Cant, "could get us up on that block. No, we need to follow the rules. Better if I end up buying her, I think. We don't want to lend weight to rumors about Simon's being a slaver." If we could get her free, Rey thought silently, and she is a Courtless changeling, perhaps I could convince her to join Autumn. If she's not, then it might earn brownie points with whichever Court she is affiliated with when she's freed.

"What did she steal?" Rey asked Heron-Head[?], choosing to ignore the allegation and insult.

"I am uncertain," the creature stated. "Perhaps the truth. Or someone's freedom. Or perhaps she took something from a Marketeer and pledged to pay, but failed to do so." He sounded more like he was talking

to himself than to Rey. He rambled on in his musings. "She's feisty. I'll bet her memories are delicious! I think I'll purchase her. I'll eat her memories of the pledge first, so that she will abandon hope of escape. Then I can savor each memory at my leisure." A long, whip-like tongue swept over his beak. The end of the tongue had a frayed appearance, being made up of hundreds of hair-thin tentacles.

"Shut yer yap, you idiot bird," said the monkey man. The bird-creature clacked his beak shut and haughtily pretended not to hear the other goblin. The monkey produced a cigarette from his vest (the only article of clothing he wore) and lit it from the tip of his finger. "We won't have many more of these sales to look forward to and I want to hear the asking price."

By this time, the ogre had reeled the sylph in, grabbed her by the iron collar and yanked her to her feet.

"No more sales?" Rey repeated in surprise. "Why's that?"

"Because," the monkey rasped, "The Summer King has threatened to raid the Market and shut it down unless they suspend slave sales. Eh, well. That may or may not stop slave sales, but the Market has agreed to dismantle the blocks and officially ban it. So the next time you come shopping for slaves, you might have to look a lot harder."

Rey nodded quietly and tucked that information away. She turned her attention back to the ogre, waiting to hear what the terms and price were of the sale.

"Huh..." Rover signed. "I wonder who he's trying to impress?"

He was referring to the Summer King, of course. Slavery had been allowed for a very long time, at least as Rover understood things. The gnome had to marvel at the sudden change in heart. Unless there'd been a lobbyist group hard at work that he'd never heard of, then someone must have changed his mind.

The crane-headed goblin squawked. "The Changelings of the Duchy are always grouchy about the slave blocks. He's probably just testing his power."

The ogre on the block grabbed his goods by the back of her neck and picked her up. It obviously hurt like hell but he muttered something at her and she went still, her eyes wide and afraid.

"One changeling thief to be sold at auction under Market Law. Market Security has rounded up this little thief on behalf of the injured party, Master Blip Goretusk. All proceeds go to Master Goretusk."

The sylph struggled violently again. "I didn't do it! The dream vials were planted! I'm — gluck!" She was cut off as his fingers wrapped around her wind pipe.

The bird-goblin made a thoughtful sound and the monkey goblin laughed.

"Stupid changeling. Shut up." The Ogre continued. "Unbound and ready to be pledged at your service, this one's punishment will be deemed meted once the sale is complete. Then she belongs to the buyer. She is a skilled thief, nimble and quick. She has a talent for lies — useful, I'm sure you'll admit, in some situations. Let us start the bidding at one Kith blessing!"

Less felt very uncomfortable with the entire situation. Being mixed up with slavery once was one thing, but a second time! The explanations would seem tired and desperate. He stood on his toes to look over the crowd, scanning for familiar Summer courtiers. It would not be good to be seen here if the order had been put out by the King to ban slave sales. He had a gut feeling the Glacial Axe might be responsible for the sudden decree. He wanted to start the raid immediately but the mention of Goretusk stopped him short. He pushed his way closer to the Motley and signed, "I'm not comfortable with us being here if the Summer Court is watching. I'd fake the start of the raid if I didn't think we'd lose the opportunity to talk to Goretusk. However,

if we snatched the elemental when the goblins scatter, he might come looking for his property."

Less looked around very carefully and caught a glimpse of a slight, male figure, but it quickly disappeared in the press of bodies near a stall selling exotic fabrics. The Winter Court seeming was rather difficult to detect and it was easy to mistake one for Courtless, but Less was reasonably sure that the changeling he spotted was Winter simply due to the starkness and plainness of the seeming. His glimpse was brief enough that he made out nothing else.

A withered troll cackled and held up her gnarled hand. "I have no such thing, slavemaster. But I offer thee a human scalp taken by an Apache Indian."

The ogre nodded and looked about. "Do I hear a better offer?"

"I think she's telling the truth about being set up," Rey signed. "Shouldn't we try to help her?" [This is based on 1 sux on a Wits + Empathy roll I did off-wiki to Dustin](#). She turned her attention back to the changeling on the block, hoping to pick up some evidence of a Court affiliation, if any. Rey didn't detect any particular presence of the Seasons in her seeming, however.

"Of course we should," Simon said in deliberately casual glymjack. "We may not be able to, though. "I'm willing to try to bid. Less, can I have your box with bullet holes?"

"I don't see any Summer courtiers," Less admitted to Rey. "And the recent decree against the slave market could add credence to our insistence to impersonate slavers." He looked distastefully around at the goblins looking hungrily at his fellow air elemental. "I still don't like it. If things go badly, I'm going to announce the raid. Be ready to act." He handed the crumbled box to Simon, grateful to be free of it's burden. "I thought it could represent 'lost desire' or something," he told him. With that, he stalked off, preparing himself to look official.

"Great, just the thing," Simon said. He took the box and held it up, raising his voice. "She doesn't look like much to me, but I might need bait later. I've got this box, with contents so fearsome that the mortals choose to shoot it rather than open it. And I'll offer a memory of sex with a dryad that the Wyrd accepts as the best sex she's ever had."

Rey looked around at the crowd to see their reaction to Simon's bid. The monkey-goblin nearby was watching Simon with narrowed eyes.

The ogre mused. "Human shoot at anything that moves and most things that don't. But that memory you say?" He nodded. "The bidding now stands at a memory of a sexual encounter with fae and one shot box. Do I hear another offer?"

The troll waved her hand in refusal. "Bah. That one isn't worth more than a nice scalp."

"HMMMMMMMMMM," the heron goblin mused next to Rey. But then it shook its head.

The ogre scanned the crowd but there were no other takers.

"Oh crap, it's going to work," Simon said. he pulled out his stack of index cards and scrawled a brief note.

You just sold a memory. A couple months ago, you bargained sex with a dryad in circledell to save the life of a sprite named auriel. She is now your slave. Sex with Nola nearly killed you. try not to be so dumb in the future.

Oh yeah, and you have another slave now.

"Sold then, to the cat-changeling." The ogre lumbered over, sylph in tow, and squatted near the edge of the platform closest to Simon. He dug a bottle out of a large pouch and opened it up. A sparkling mist drew out of Simon's head and into the bottle, taking Simon's entire experience with the dryad with it. The ogre stoppered the bottle, dropped it in the bag and then picked up the box. He dropped the heavy chain to the sylph's collar in Simon's hands. "She's all yours." The ogre stood up and lumbered off the block toward the north.

"Thank you," Simon said, a little spacey from the absence in his mind. "Okay, we have real business to attend to," Simon said. "But first I guess I have to get you cleaned up and dressed." He tried to sound somewhat harsh about that, still surrounded by Hobs as the Motley was.

From his vantage point, Less kept his eyes on the ogre. Since payment was going to Goretusk, they had to follow that bottle.

Rover was already eying the iron collar, trying to figure out how to remove it. He was a little worried about infection setting in, given what it was doing to neck. In his eyes, she seemed entirely too delicate.

"Next time you buy a slave, try to make it a big one. Someone who can work at a forge. The last automatic bellows I designed had some... engineering flaws."

That was an understatement. Rover could still hear the bright crackling of flame and hysterical shouting of the villagers.

"Rover," Rey said quellingly. "Not funny."

"Well it is if you're an engineer." Rover protested.

"But not if you're a slave, I suppose. And, yes, I'm only kidding." He spoke that last to their new 'hire'. "We have no intention of subjecting you to any sort of the hideous labors that slave owners seem to mire themselves in. Simon will have to fill you in on what that entails... if he can actually still remember."

"This is a bad place to have this discussion," Simon said patiently in glymjack. "We need to find Goretusk, and she needs some care we can't give her right here." he turned to the girl and said "Follow me," leading the way, but careful not to pull the chain, out of the market and toward the line of stalls where Blip Goretusk sold his wares. He hoped to spot a place to buy her at least a tunic, and something to get rid of the iron collar first. Unfortunately, she's have to wear some kind of bonds until Simon could get her out of the market. And that wouldn't be until their business was done.

The girl looked at the others, and then at Simon. She put her hands on her hips and said firmly, "No."

Rey took a step closer to unnamed changeling, putting the full weight of her own nature into effect. "You asked for *my* help, and you're getting it." Rey spoke in a quick hush. "Trust me."

"Well, I don't want your help anymore. Your friend got me off the block — thanks by the way — and now I'll just be on my way if you don't mind," she said, miffed. She fumbled with the chain, draping it over her shoulders. The weight of it forced her to slump but she pretended like she didn't notice, just like she pretended she was utterly naked and more than a little vulnerable with a cold iron clamp on her neck. She looked around like she was trying to put together some kind of plan on how to leave without worse things happening.

"We can't let you go here. It's impossible. Even if the magic now binding you would let us... and, yes, faerie magic can be very cruel that way... these animals would either just put you right back up on the block or tear you to shreds." Rover warned the girl in his lowest tones.

"You've got no clothes, no resources other than your wits and no way to get that collar off. At least if you come with us you'll find some help. But if you keep putting up this stubborn act then we may be forced to pretend the part of slaving jackasses just so that they don't turn on us.

"None of us are out of the woods, yet. Either work with us, now that you've gotten us into this, or we'll all be up on the block. They haven't pulled it down yet, in case you hadn't noticed."

The sylph's eyes widened as Rover spoke and she glanced around, this time looking at the various goblins instead of potential escape routes. Naked as she was, she couldn't conceal the shudder that shivered through her body. "Okay okay. You've got a point or three. Fine. I'll go with you for now, but let's just be clear on one thing. I'm *no* one's slave." She poked him in the nose for effect. "Capiche? I've had a very," poke, "bad," poke, "day."

Rover managed to resist the urge to poke back. In her current state, it just wouldn't be fair. His voice was starting to rise, however, along with his temper.

"Yeah? Did you have to deal with a special little princess who didn't know a friend when it got poked in the nose by her? 'Cause I have to tell you, that can ruin your day right there. Now can we move it, your highness, or would you prefer to draw even more attention than you already have?"

"If that's settled," Simon hissed, "Let's go." The little floor show had thrown a crimp in Simon's plans. Now he wanted some more space between him and the slave block. "There's a seamstress a few rows south of here," he said. "Near the bratwurst place."

At least the bratwurst place took cash.

As they walked, Rey stayed next to the rescued changeling. After a few steps, she spoke softly, her words for the sylph alone. "Listen, I helped get you out of a big mess, and you're only going to attract more trouble until you learn what's what and get set up and on your own two feet. For one Moon, I'll help you out, get you established. In return, you help me out when I need it, and owe me a favor. If you don't hold up your end, though, it's gonna cost you. What do you say?" Her tone was casual, and she knew the offer she was making was a good one, and probably more fair than the sylph deserved.

The sylph's chain slipped from one shoulder and she stepped on it, causing herself to stumble. She bent down and picked it up, then straightened up quickly when she realized she was providing a view. She blushed furiously while she wound the chain up one arm. It was leaving red marks on her bare skin. "Dammit." She looked at Rey. "Uh, I don't know. I don't think I should be making deals right now because at this point I feel like I might do anything to not have to be naked anymore. And to get this collar off."

"No problem," Rey replied. "Just think about it."

"Clothes are on me. I'll also try to find some bolt cutters or something. And I'll throw in a bratwurst. But as soon as we can, we need to have a talk. We're here to help a friend in trouble. She'll die if we can't. And rescuing you has put a serious hitch into our plans." Away from the block, Simon was free to let compassion into his voice, and to offer the girl at least the minimal protection of a handkerchief. "By the way, I'm Simon. What would you like us to call you?"

The sylph snatched the handkerchief away and stared at him. "Are you serious?"

Rey rolled her eyes and slung her backpack off her shoulder as they walked. She stuck a hand into it and pulled out an old oversized t-shirt that just might be long enough to provide modesty. "Here," the flowering changeling said, extending it towards the sylph. "You can borrow this."

The sylph looked at it and took it but didn't say anything. She held up the back of the shirt and made an

educated guess, then used her claws to make several long slits from the end of the shirt up the back. The material parted easily. She then took the long scraps of cloth and tied them together. It was already beginning to fray but the makeshift belt looked like it would hold together for a little while. She then pulled on the shredded shirt, which now accommodated her wings. She tied her ragged belt to hold things together. Since Rey was a bit taller than the sylph, the shirt came down a little further but only an inch or so.

"Um, yeah," Simon said. "I figured it could protect your neck for a bit. The clothes shop is two rows down. That way works, though. But seriously, Simon, Rey, Rover, and Less. And we'd like to know what to call you. Then, I'd like to buy you something decent to wear, a meal if you want it, and to get that chain off you. I paid your price to keep you free. The only thing I ask in return is that we get to talk a little afterward. We have to go deal with Goretusk, and you know more about him than we do."

The sylph nodded as Simon spoke and looked around trying to match the names to faces. She was about to introduce herself but froze at the mention of Goretusk. "That low-down, dirty, rotten, swindling bastard? And you're going to try to make a deal with him. Good luck! You can see what good it did me."

"Yeah, we kind of have to," Simon said. "I'll explain after we get all that other stuff done. So let's start with a name. Not your true one or anything, but 'hey naked girl' just doesn't seem very respectful to me," he added with a disarming smile.

"Belle," she said. "You can call me Belle."

Meanwhile, Less had followed the ogre away from the auction block. They threaded here and there, once even seeming to navigate a rough circle, but mostly they traveled north. The ogre never seemed to notice or care that Less was quietly, stealthily following.

Finally, at the very edge of the market he approached a stand, greeting the vendor and then set down the battered box and the bottle containing Simon's memory. They exchange pleasantries, and then the hob snatched up the items and hid them away in one of many trunks stored in the back of a small wagon that also served as the back wall of his merchant space.

Blip Gortusk was an ugly creature with the head of a boar, wiry, splotchy hair, and warty skin the color of rotten grain. He wore decorative silver and gold chains about his neck and one of his huge, protruding tusks sported a gold band. His pig-like ears were notched and lined with gold loop earrings. His counter featured a glass case within which sat rows of vials of various colors.

Less browsed some Hedge cloth as he inconspicuously surveyed Goretusk's stall. Several small hob-women with chicken legs pecked and squawked at him to buy something or to entice him to a neighbouring stall. The rest of the Motley would be here soon, Goretusk wasn't hiding. He decided to spend the time checking out the sylph's story. He smoothed his unruly hair and replaced his hat before he marched over to the porcine goblin.

"Goretusk," asked Less as he hooked his umbrella over his arm and pulled a notebook from his pocket. "There have been increased complaints of theft at the Market. Summer Court wants to levy a merchants tax to cover costs of policing the area to protect citizens of the Duchy. Do you feel this would be beneficial to your business? Strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree or strongly disagree?"

Blip looked around at Less, trying to figure out which eye to look into. He grunted piggishly. "Disagree. Summer hasn't a right to tax merchants. Changelings want protection, then changelings pay for it."

"So you have not experienced any theft recently?" inquired Less as he scribbled in his notebook.

"Eh? Oh. Ah... why yes actually. Market security took care of it."

"Was the perpetrator hob-kin? Were you satisfied with how Market security resolved the problem?"

"Changeling," the hob answered gruffly, then shrugged. "I got mine back, with interest as recompense for the crime."

Less raised an eyebrow and looked at Goretusk for a second before continuing, "And when the Summer Court shuts down the slave blocks, do you think services from Market security will suffer?"

He shrugged. "Unlikely. I think the changeling courts are fools to try it. It will only mean greater profits in the slave trade."

Less flipped his notebook closed. Goretusk's story remained consistent and there wasn't much more that Less could do to besides polling the entire market for witnesses. The rest of the Motley hadn't shown up yet, which was worrying, but they did have a naked changeling (and possible thief) on a leash to contend with. Mizuko didn't have the luxury of waiting so he decided he'd better negotiate with Goretusk alone. "Thank you for your cooperation Goretusk. I do have some personal business to attend to while I'm in the Market. I'm looking for accurate directions to the nearest bloodwort tree in the Hedge."

"Bloodwort, eh? Ah. Now that is a particularly powerful and rare fruit. It is also well guarded and well hidden in the cases I've seen." The hob snorted in amusement. "Only those with great need would take such risks. Am I right?"

Less looked him in the eyes. "Only those *powerful* enough to face these risks would seek bloodwort," he said coldly. "The danger lies at the tree itself. The journey is trifling in comparison."

The hob stared back at him with squinting, red eyes, trying to measure the strength of the changeling. But the hob turned away first. "True enough." His nostrils flared as if trying to scent where he might best make a profit. "Well. I happen to have a map to a bloodwort tree." He turned around and reached into the wagon, then produced a small scroll case. He set it on the counter. The case itself was a cylinder of worn, plain leather held together with a brass latch. "I could sell you this map, for the right offer."

"I can deliver the body of a vileshrike," Less offered. "The feathers are particularly noxious."

"Mm. And we'd have a sale if you had it here. What else can you offer?"

"You won't take a Pledge of delivery?" asked Less.

"A pledge, you say?" The hob grunted. "We might work something out." His lips pulled back in an approximation of a grin. "And if you fail to pay, we'll just let the Wyrd work things out on you." He moved the case a little closer to Less. "You get the map, I get the vileshrike corpse within seven days or you let the Wyrd strike the balance to make us even. Deal?"

"Seven days as time passes for me. Deal." Less felt no need to shake the hob's hand as he tugged at the Wyrd and released some of his own identity to seal the pact. "I have many uses for good information, Goretusk. I have no desire to sour a mutually beneficial business arrangement."

Less took the case and felt the full impact of the deal he had made with the goblin hum inside him like a plucked piano wire. The thought of not being able to deliver the dead monster in time tightened his grip on the leather tube. Snapping open the lid, he withdrew the directions and perused them briefly to ensure the hob's side of the bargain had been met. Satisfied, he turned to go but suddenly remembered his cover story. "Ah yes," he said, fishing the notebook from his pocket. "Girdleflap...Gnusnuffle...Goretusk..." he mumbled

through an imaginary list. "Madame Harelip! Would you know where her stall is, by chance?"

"Eh, urm." The piggyish hob scratched his bristly mane. "You must mean Octus, the woman with those sexy six tentacle arms." Well, she said she had eight, but one only saw six.

And with that, Less entered back into the incoherent dreamscape that was the 13th Street Market to seek his missing friends.

—

"Belle is a pretty name. Let's get you some clothes to match," Simon said. They'd finally arrived at the clothier's stall, a collection of racks with clothes on mundane plastic hangers. But the clothes were mostly hedge-spun, so not particularly mundane at all.

Rey, Rover, and Simon located clothes and quickly haggled to arrange for the purchase of functional but inexpensive hedge-spun articles for Belle and they snacked on some goblin fruit along the way. Next they looked for something to cut the rivets or collar, with Rover's trained eye to help. However, the best tools weren't made of iron or even steel and Rover made a firm statement about lesser alloys simply not being strong enough to cut the rivet. Since most fae magic wouldn't work against the cold wrought thing, that meant it was going to take some real work even in the mortal realm. And it would have to be done very carefully to avoid badly injuring Belle in the process.

After a half hour, the group had to give up.

"Okay, I'm sorry, Belle" Simon said. "It won't be too hard outside the Hedge, but we can't get that thing off you right now. We've got to get on with our mission." The group had found a relatively quiet place to talk. "So here's the story so far. Once upon a time there was a brave (more or less), clever (more often than not), good (for a given value) Motley in the Desert Duchy. One of their members was stricken with a terrible faerie poison, for which the only cure was the rare bloodwort fruit. Simon, the charming, dashing, and devilshly handsome member of the group found out that a Hob named Goretusk knew the way to find a bloodwort fruit. So he and his friends went to the goblin market to see Goretusk.

"When the Changelings got to the market, they saw a poor Changeling named Belle, wrongly accused of theft about to be sold as a slave. But for the members of this Motley, that would never do. Quickly, they cast about to find a way to save her. Not having vast magics or powerful armies to fight every hob at the market, they did the only thing they could and bought her themselves, then tried to let her go as soon as it was safe. But they'd spent precious time in helping Belle, and also spent some of what they'd planned to use to obtain the bloodwort on her ransom. And so their mission stood in doubt. **Bom Bom BoMMMM**

"And that's about where you come in," the cat-like changeling said, getting serious again. "We'll continue to help you as much as we reasonably can, later. But right now we've really got to try to get that bloodwort. Anything you can tell us about Goretusk will probably be helpful, and if we can figure out a way to prove he set you up, I will personally enjoy applying metaphorical thumbscrews in revenge. So, how'd a nice girl like you end up on the auction block?"

"As much as I am interested in how Belle got there," Rey said gently, "I'm afraid we don't have time for this discussion right now Mr. Storyteller." She reached into the pocket of her suit jacket and withdrew a small business card case. Flipping it open with easy grace, Rey selected a card and offered it to Belle. "If you ever find yourself in Mythic City, look me up." The logo on the card was for the Mountain Garden Hotel & Casino, along with her mortal name and contact info as general manager and chief operating officer. Her work address was the most reliable way for anyone to get a hold of her.

Belle nodded and kept the card in her hand. The outfit they'd put together was interesting but had no pockets. She glanced down at it and raised an eyebrow. "Cool. I work at a casino, too."

Simon felt the same time pressure, but he also really had a feeling the motley would need to know more about Goretusk. "We are in a real hurry," he admitted. "So mostly, we just need to know whatever you can tell us about Goretusk before we have to go deal with him ourselves."

"I can't tell you anything," Belle insisted. "I told you I was set up. I don't know the guy. Some pig started squealing at me and Market Security came along. They found these vials in my shopping bag — which I told them wasn't mine. That was my first mistake. He claimed I'd stolen them, I got pissed and fried one of the Market guards — bigger mistake by the way — and they roughed me up and took everything I had. End of story. That's all I know about Goretusk. You got to deal with them? Then I'm sorry for you. Probably you'll be swindled. One day I hope he gets caught and then we'll just see how he likes Market justice then."

"Listen, I don't mind giving you a hand, but I need to get this collar off. It's gonna scar and that's bad for my career and also it messes with my magic." She paused in thought, looking from Rey to Simon. "I appreciate what you guys did for me. I was looking at a pretty miserable end to a pretty miserable day. When I get back I can make some calls and get this collar off. Then I could help your friend. Tell me where your friend is and I'll see what can be done for her while you guys are out."

"Okay," Simon said. "So we know to watch our stuff closely. Better than nothing. Here." He fished out his roll of cash and peeled off a few bills, enough for cab fare to just about anywhere reasonable, and he included one of his personal calling cards. "That should get you wherever you want to go. Our friend is in our hollow, or in the Hedge nearby." He looked to Rey and Rover to see if they wanted to trust a relative stranger with the location of one of their Doors.

"Don't even think about telling her anything about where the Hollow is," Rey said in Glymjack Cant. "Why do you think I gave her a contact for me at work, and not anything personal?"

Simon gave a brief shrug as acknowledgement. "It'd be more trouble than we can take right now to show you the way in, and a little bit much for our brief acquaintance. Thanks for the offer, though."

"Or we could make arrangements to meet somewhere on the other side and then see what our friend says," Rey added.

"You wanna?" Simon asked. "I lost track of time looking for bolt cutters, and we need to find Less. But maybe we should split up. If we can only bargain for the Bloodwort once, having just once, then there's something to be said for that. Whatever we do should probably involve going back to the north side of the market."

Belle shrugged. "Up to you. If your friend is dying without this thing, I was just thinking. What happens to your friend if you have to spend a day looking for this blood-thingy? Will she make it however long it takes you to get to the blood-whatsit and then get back to your hollow? What if you are delayed out there. Stuff happens. Then again, you could just die out there and never come back. Sounds like your friend would die too and no one would ever know. Heck, if your friend has a steel hack saw or something, I could even just go there right away."

"But I get it if you don't trust me. I'm just a slave you bought off the auction block." She gave them a wry smile to let them know she was joking, even if it was a very bad one.

Rey smiled back at Belle. "What might you be able to do to help our friend?" she asked.

"I can slow down time for your friend," Belle said simply. "Look, it's gonna take you probably hours wandering around the Hedge right? And then you have to find a way back. Best case? Eight or twelve hours, right? You said your friend was really sick and you are after something very rare and powerful. Your own comments have pointed out that having to deal with me has slowed you down dangerously and it's only bee what? A half hour right?"

"So yeah. Time is what you need, right? I'm offering you time."

"How does it work?" Rey asked. "What do you need to do?"

"It doesn't really matter if you don't need my help."

"Except that we do need your help." Rover insisted. "I'll take her back, blindfolded or whatever, and let her in. She doesn't need to know where the door is. That'll give me time to work on that collar."

Belle shrugged. "Works. My power triggers when crossing from the mortal realm to some place in the hedge. I can affect time for those I'm with when I go through. So, all we need to do is get your friend through a door into the Hedge and I'll slow down time for us. Hollow, path, doesn't matter. Two hours for us might be more like six or eight hours for you to do your job and get her the blood fruit."

Simon fished out his keys and removed the car key and dongle from the set. "Here," he said. "Um... I think there's a blindfold in the glovebox."

Rover nodded, gruffly, and accepted the keys.

"Try to send word if you run into trouble. I'll see what I can do about a rescue party."

Sometimes it was good not to have all of your eggs in one basket. Rover would hardly be in position to free the others from the auction block if he were up on there, himself. Then again, they'd likely have equal trouble in asking for help in the first place.

Details.

Rover flicked his iron marble out once more and let the mechanical canine resolve once more. After all of the unfolding had finished, he rapped twice just behind BoBo's bronze saddle. A panel came loose from the overlapping plates and slid neatly back on folding hinges. Inside, where there should have been a busy, constant commotion of moving parts, there was only smooth darkness. Apparently whatever method had been used for BoBo to unfold himself through the marble was employed a second time to create simple storage space.

"Hop in." He instructed Belle. "I'll leave the trunk open. It'd get pretty cramped in there, otherwise."

"Yeah. Thanks," Belle said with a dry wit. She climbed up carefully, glancing in the hole doubtfully, but she got in anyway. "I s'pose you want me to wear that blind fold." She held up the ruined tee that Rey had given her before they found better clothing. She folded it until it was a long, narrow strip and held it up. "Okay if I just wear this?"

Rover looked at the makeshift blinder and shrugged. "Well, I could just close the lid, but then I'd miss out on your sweet voice in my ear. Just keep your eyes covered and we'll be fine."

Belle wrapped the cloth and tied it. Then with a lurch, Rover and his passenger began riding out of the goblin market and onto a path he knew would eventually set them in the right direction. After a minute, he felt a hand on his arm.

"It's Rover, right?" Belle asked. She was still blindfolded, and had made no attempt to cheat and see around it. "I have to ask something that's been bothering me. How did you know I was a princess?"

He hadn't, actually. The comment had been meant as a slight towards her attitude. Rover had no idea that she was a real princess, though he had no intention of letting her know that.

"It's the royal demeanor." He replied. "Kind of a dead giveaway. I'm a little surprised that we're the best you can arrange for in terms of a rescue, though. No royal guard to ride to the rescue?"

Rover still wasn't entirely convinced that she was telling the truth. Just because the changeling claimed to be a noble, that didn't make it so.

She made a disgruntled noise. "Ha. *Used* to be a princess. Now I'm lucky to get a side show job at a casino in Vegas. There's nothing *royal* about me these days." She sighed.

"Hey, I know people who'd kill to work Vegas. Don't knock it... but I can see where you're coming from. How'd it happen?"

"There was a guy," she said simply, as if that explained it all.

After a moment, she added, "Well I'm not a storyteller like your friend, but I'll try. He was sweet. Always kind of awkward and trying so hard to get me to like him. He said he was the prince of Denmark. Eventually, I did like him. We ran off to Vegas together and got married by one of those Elvis impersonators. Turns out he really had a palace and servants and the whole thing. Only, it wasn't in Denmark. I admit I was pretty slow on the uptake there. I was in love, or at least I thought so. I trusted him.

"Turns out he was just in love with being in love. When he got the idea that princes should also have consorts and concubines, we had a fight. He hurt me, I ran away, he found me, said he was sorry and we made up. Rinse and repeat. A lot. Only one day I ran all the way back to Vegas and he *didn't* find me. Or rather, he got bored of the game and stopped coming after me. And the princess lived unhappily ever after. The end."

Rover wasn't about to argue the romantic lives of royalty with Belle. He felt a greater understanding of the exact politics involved, but the gnome was pretty sure she didn't want to hear anything about it. Instead, he tried a different track.

"Unhappily ever after? What kind of stupid ending is that? You mean, you were thrown out of a world which other people built and you had limited control over only to find yourself with enough magical power to now create one for yourself; your own friends, your own rules and your own life? Only, rather than putting your own hand to the task of constructing this reality, you give up and decide it can bounce you around like a pinball? Much the same way you got here in the first place, if you don't mind me drawing a comparison.

"Unhappily ever after my rocky, wrinkled ass."

"Um, that was my obviously unsuccessful attempt at dry humor by poking fun at myself, shorty." She told him, "I said unhappily because I have to live with the fact I was such a fool to begin with that jerk. And stupider still to keep letting him do that to me time and again. I wasn't even thinking about my life after, but gee thanks now that you mention it, that's been real fun, too. Say you got any lemon juice with you? That would really make it all better."

"Of course I have lemon juice." Rover insisted. "Lots of it, all back at the lab. You wouldn't believe how many uses it has, not the least of which is making Lemonade.

"And if my observations have been correct over the years, most women are at their most foolish when faced with jerks. I doubt you're the first one to make a mistake, nor will you be the last. But maybe you should let me know exactly who this jerk is and I can see if we can keep him from doing it one more time again?"

She sighed. "I heard that when a former captive of one of the Gentry speaks his name, he can hear it. I don't know if that's really true, but I've had enough bad luck for one day. I'll pass. As for what he's like, well if you

run into a smooth operator with killer looks, a foreign accent, and apparently more money than God, that might be," she shuddered, "my husband."

"Kind of understand why people fall for him. Class, money and good looks? I'm sure you're not the only one. So how does he *keep* doing it to you again? Is this charming bastard stalking you or something?"

"He hasn't been. At least not for a while now. He did that until I finally cleared the Hedge and made it back to Vegas itself," she explained. "See I'd get mad and come to my senses and then take off running. I guess I was in the hedge, I don't really know. All I know is that he kept finding me, make up and tell me how sorry he was and then take me back with him. Stupid of me, right? I just couldn't resist him. The last time I escaped, though, I finally made it all the way through the Hedge and found myself in Vegas, where I stayed. Honestly, I think he let me go. But I haven't seen him since I've been in Vegas."

"I've had enough problems without him since I got back anyway. There are other changelings in Vegas. A lot of them. There's always this irritating 'come join our side' thing going on. I don't want to be part of any courts. I just wanted to be left alone, you know? Try to make my way through life on my own. It's been hard, especially since the bastard had replaced me with someone that took my name and my life. And she's a goddamn crack head. Or maybe it's heroine and cocaine. I don't know and I don't care. She ruined my relationship with my family, and the few friends I had."

"Ever tried to make a living with no real name, no identity to give? It is *not* easy and it's not fun. The kinds of jobs you can get where they don't ask for that stuff are not the kinds of things 'princesses' do. But there you are. That's my life."

He felt her touch his shoulder. "TMI, sorry. So tell me about you. What's your deal? What are you all about?"

The gnome shrugged.

"I'm Rover; I build things, I fix things. Sometimes I even break things, but only in constructive ways."

There was more to his story than that, but he wasn't ready to spill everything just yet. He still didn't even know this Belle — she might be a spy of some sort. There was no way he felt confident in telling her about the raid on his lab that put him into his current position.

"I like keeping things simple. 'Not a big fan of drama, you know?'"

"Yeah, I get it." The sylph settled back and was quiet after that.

—

Simon watched as the pair retreated. "Rover just took my keys," he stated. "Oh well. Let's find Less." He turned toward the north, roughly back the way they'd come. Then he paused for a second. "Something's been bugging me since this started. What are you and Mizuko involved in that someone would send a hitman to kill her?"

"We kept the hitman from killing some people," Rey replied with a shrug. "He came after has a matter of pride - his reputation was based on nobody ever getting the best of him. I doubt anything like that will ever happen again."

"That sounds exciting," Simon said. "When was this? What happened?"

"Sorry Simon," Rey said, "this is a part of my life that doesn't involve the motley."

Simon's mood subtly changed. He fell out of step with Rey. "The fact we're here right now proves that's not true," he said. "Over this way. We'll avoid the slave blocks and make up some time." He left it up to Rey to catch up with him or not. For now, he didn't have anything else to say.

Rey reached out and touched Simon's arm to get his attention. "You don't work for me, so I'm not going to tell you the details," she signed. "The hitman is now dead, and there will be no reprisals for his death. At no point were you, Less or Rover in any danger. And you three never will be, as I don't ever foresee a situation where you will be involved in my mortal affairs. I keep my personal life separate from my business life, and it's going to stay that way. I hope you'll respect that." Her expression, and the movements of her hands, were calm and collected, and she hoped he would respect her request and not pry.

Simon said, in glymjack, "This isn't the time for this argument. But you can't only partly be in the Motley, no matter how much you want to think so. We're all in danger whenever you and Mizuko are, and your business already affects your... the rest of us. I hope you figure that out before someone else ends up on death's door, because Mizuko is already only alive from pure luck, and she's not out of the woods yet." More disappointed in Rey than angry, Simon forcibly shifted his mind back to the task at hand. He didn't really expect her to clear everything she did with the rest of the group. Simon himself certainly wouldn't. But the fact she'd told them nothing at all hurt. It spoke to a lack of trust and a lack of connection that bothered him, since she'd been willing to let the others bind their fates to hers without letting them know what they'd be getting into.

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Less spotted Rey and Simon heading his direction, but saw no sign of Rover and the sylph. It was against his very nature to wave and call attention to himself so he drifted with the moving crowds until he managed to match pace with the two changelings. Sidestepping a walking starfish with a baby's face at the centre, he announced his presence in a no-nonsense manner. "I've got the directions. Where's Rover?"

Simon nearly jumped out of his skin. "Ghaah! Don't *do* that."

Rey told him about Rover and Belle, and how Belle was going to help the motley. "How far is the tree from here?" she finished.

Less couldn't be sure. The scroll seemed more about landmarks and what direction to turn from there than about real distance. "Impossible to say. Distances in the Hedge are a bit like walking in a dream. Sometimes you are there without remembering how you got there, other times the landmarks never seem to get any closer."

"Then we should go now," Simon said. "Even with Belle's help, we can't waste any time."

"I wish we could get word to Rover," said Less. "I need to deliver the body of the vileshrike to Goretusk before a week is out." He examined the directions again to see if he knew where the first landmark was.

After the small group left the Market behind them, they spent some effort orienting themselves to the map. Then they began making their way carefully through the Hedge along paths they'd never traveled or seen before. Illusions of perspective hid abrupt turns and secret paths that avoided hazards which may have slowed the trio or stopped them entirely. Ravines carved through the Hedge made a confusing maze of rocky paths that led the way through mountainous terrain.

Hours passed, and the sun settled toward the horizon but at last the group found themselves at the top of a mountain. Here, stubby growth failed to insulate them from distant roars of strange beasts. The shadow of a

distant feathered dragon could be seen sweeping across the cliff face of a neighboring mountain. Insect sounds had long since died away. Now there was only the sound of wind and the distant screams of unknown terrors, but the team had arrived at their destination.

The bloodwort tree stood alone, with one bulbous fruit dangling from one thick, knotted branch. Its silver and black leaves gleamed in the light of the setting sun. No creature stirred here at all.

Less motioned for the motley to remain as quiet as possible as they surveyed the landscape.

Rey nodded and looked around. Something as valuable as the bloodwort tree would never be left alone or unguarded. There had to be something here. Or above them. She looked up, scanning the sky.

Simon waited. This entire business was far too rustic for his skill-set. He kept his eyes and ears open and wondered if maybe the guardian of the tree had wandered off to do his business or something.

"There aren't many rules of the Hedge that apply to all situations," signed Less. "But you can pretty much count on two things: never take without asking, and there is always a price." He shifted to check over his netgun. "The guardian could very well be the tree itself. One of us should go close enough to address the tree while the others keep watch."

"Do you want to go?" Rey signed to Simon.

Simon looked back and forth between his motley mates. Neither of them were volunteering, so he nodded and stepped forward, hands at his sides slightly away from his body. "Greetings and salutations," he said loud enough to carry a short distance. "I've come to bargain for bloodwort."

The earth at the foot of the tree shifted in long lines that spread out toward Simon and the others and then the tree branches stirred. The shivering movement stopped, leaving the single, dangling fruit swaying.

Simon walked forward, carefully staying between the lines.

The tree shivered and moved once more. Red eyes opened in the bark and a mouth formed. "Halt, plaything of the Fae. Why do you seek the my fruit?" The voice sounded too aged to identify with gender, dry and raspy.

Less cautiously moved a quarter circle around the tree. He kept his netgun handy but did not brandish it. He did not want to offend the bloodwort but he also didn't want to be a sitting duck for Hedge-predators that liked to lie in wait for suckers distracted by the tree. Less thought he saw something dark and low to the ground prowling in the thicket that stood some twenty paces downhill from the talking bloodwort tree.

Simon took a respectful half step backwards and gave a little bow. "Your fruit, venerated one, is sovereign over toxins of the blood, and one dear to me suffers from the poison of a hedge beast. I seek her salvation." Not the best opening position, but, then again, this was a seller's market no matter how Simon might have tried to spin it.

"So then, by some use of my fruit you believe her life would be saved. Very interesting!" the tree stated. "But not surprising. Many have come to me seeking this same 'salvation' you speak of. What you must understand is that I regard my fruit, the one single fruit I can create from a culmination of effort that represents a year's work, as my own unborn child.

"Yet all things have a price, do they not? Even my own child. But I warn you that we shall bargain for my fruit only once. When next you return, I shall claim your bodies and slowly eat them, feeding them to my next bloodwort fruit in hopes that perhaps the next child shall live.

"Now," it rasped. "Let us bargain."

Simon had a thought. "Does your child grow from the fruit, or from a seed inside? And will it require the sustenance of thinking beings? I ask because it might be that we could carry your fruit away from here, but see to it that your child is born and thrives. Might you find that an equitable arrangement?"

"Equitable?" the tree shook with pleasure. "Indeed that *would* be equitable. The fruit is cleansing and contains a piece of my magic. The seed itself is what will grow into a tree. All it requires is a pure heart."

"I take it you mean your seedling must be planted with a pure heart, thus rendering the heart useless to the original possessor," Simon ventured. "Because these things could never be simple."

"Nurturing a bloodwort tree to grow is an important task, changeling. It requires a sacrifice, but only a pure heart would do so willingly. What is required is much simpler and less painful than what you suggest, though your way could work I suppose. But I sense you are not of a mind to bargain your heart or that of your friends and would enter such a bargain only if you felt you could find some loophole to escape it. Let us return to a more productive line of bargaining, shall we?"

Less heard a menacing growl emanate from the thicket he approached.

"My apologies," Simon said. "My experiences with the Hedge have often been bloody. It's led me to grim expectations. My only hesitation to enter such a bargain was that to do so, I'd have to sacrifice such innocence as I have left. But I have to be honest and tell you that I doubt my heart is pure enough to fulfill this need. I would willingly spend my blood and my time to save my friend, and to make it possible that some other who needed the bloodwort's healing might have it. But I won't bargain with what I don't have."

"As I suspected," the tree responded. "Then if you have nothing else to bargain with, perhaps one of your companions do."

Rey took a step forward. "If I may be so bold," she said politely and with great respect. "What specifically is required for the sacrifice?"

"Someone pure of heart must swallow the seed," it stated. "It will germinate within them and upon their death, a new bloodwort tree will sprout."

"Will the seedling kill the person, or will it wait until something else kills its host?" Rey asked, wanting to be certain of the facts, or as much as she could given the situation.

"The seedling's life cycle is triggered by the transition of life into death. The transition of a pure heart from life to death empowers the growth of the bloodwort tree. In this way, the host's heart feeds the tree. The purity of heart upon death grants the tree the power to make a fruit that can cleanse impurity. Thus the cycle continues. But should the host's heart become impure, then instead of a bloodwort tree, a terrible evil born of the blackened heart shall be freed instead."

"I would be lying if I said I knew for certain my heart was pure," Rey said, "but I am willing to take the risk. I will swallow the seed, if you will permit me to do so." Mizuko was a member of her motley, her sister, her friend. She really could do no less.

"Your heart is not pure, but it is possible you may reclaim it." The tree said. "Are you certain you wish to make this bargain for my fruit?"

"How can I reclaim it?" Rey asked, not surprised at the tree's pronouncement.

"That is not a question I can answer. I gather it is something you would know if it happens. I know it when I

see it. But I cannot describe it." The tree's eyes swiveled slightly as it examined first Rey, then Simon, and then more distantly Less, who was still worried about what was in the thicket. "If you would see to my seedling, and pledge to do it, then I would allow that the seed might be swallowed by anyone willing to make the sacrifice. You must remember, though, to return the body to the Hedge where the seedling will find a guardian and a chance at life."

In the meantime, Less had long turned his attention away from the bargaining. When he had heard that a heart, pure or otherwise, was required for the birth of a new bloodwort tree he knew he could never make the bargain. He had directed his attention outward and had encountered the growl in the bushes.

Upon hearing the growl, he immediately backed away a few steps to respect the territory of the hidden creature but he readied his netgun all the same. *Was this the tree's guardian or just a local resident?* he wondered, trying to see some movement amongst the leaves and thorns. He saw a shadow of a four-legged beast slip deeper into the thicket.

Simon looked to Less and Rey for affirmation, sketching out glymjack sign that roughly meant "works for me. How about you?" While his own heart was of doubtful purity, he thought it would be possible to find a worthy and willing vessel for the seed.

Rey nodded.

Less wasn't paying attention, but he'd given every indication that he trusted Simon and Rey to handle the negotiations, so Simon said "We can accept that price. We will care for the seed and seek until we find a pure-hearted person willing to become its vessel ([The bit I left out](#)) for one full year, after which one of our motley will take it, and carry the vessel's body to the Hedge upon his or her death in return for your fruit. Do we have a bargain?"

And what was Less looking at? Simon glanced into the foliage but saw nothing himself.

"Wait," Rey interrupted. "We can't agree to just that. Will there be a time limit, and what will happen if we cannot fulfill the pledge?"

"The seed must find a host within one full turn of the moon, or the blessing you seek shall be undone," the tree stated. "Agree to this and we have a bargain. But remember, return here again, and I will use your bodies as materials to make my next bloodwort fruit."

"I can't agree to that," Rey said. "We have no way of determining if a person has a pure heart."

"That was already specified, I believe," Simon said. He looked to the tree for confirmation. "You accept that we might not find a vessel with a pure heart, correct? The deal is only that we make an honest effort and find a vessel, pure or not, within the turning of the moon?" it was better to be sure of these things. But Simon was getting worried about the time.

"It does not matter to me, honest effort or not. If you do not find a host within one turn of the moon, then the bargain is that any benefit to your friend will be undone. If your chosen host has an impure heart, then *something* will spawn from them. It will not be a bloodwort tree, but it will be my child nevertheless. Therefore I do not care if you find one of pure heart or not for you shall deal with the consequences of your own choice, not I."

Simon forced himself to slow down and think through the terms. "You give us one bloodwort fruit, with its power, effective upon agreement. We agree to see to it that the seed is swallowed by a living person within one turning of the moon, and upon the vessel's death deliver the body to the Hedge, with no further conditions. Should we fail to uphold the bargain, you will withdraw the fruit's blessing. Is this correct and agreeable to all parties?"

"No." The tree's eyes narrowed at Simon suspiciously. "Are you doing that deliberately?"

"I assure you not," Simon said. "... think something is waiting in the brush to kill us." He thought back to see what he'd missed, and couldn't think of anything. "Is something amiss with the bargain?"

"Soon. I suspect a moment for me is different from a moment to you." The tree shook its branches in a weary shrug. "The bargain I am interested in is simpler than that," the tree stated. "But do not try to stipulate that I must come and take away the benefit my fruit grants. I am a tree. Let the Wyrd do what it would. This is the pledge: In exchange for my fruit, you promise to find a host for the seed within one turn of the moon. If you do not, the benefits you derived from the fruit will be undone." The tree had told the motley the consequences of choosing a poor host, and informed them how to be sure the seed would grow best. But it did not care if the motley unleashed a monster or grew a bloodwort tree. It didn't particularly care if the motley found a host with a pure heart, but it wanted them to at least work for it at least as hard as he'd worked to create the fruit. "This is the bargain you have asked for."

"I have a counter offer," Rey replied. "You require bodies to create your fruit, correct?"

Simon signed "Rey? What are you doing?" From what he could tell, they were getting as fair a deal as they were likely to find... and one that might solve another problem as a bonus.

"I'm not willing to take the risk of creating a monster, or trying to keep an eye on whoever it is we get to swallow the seed," Rey signed back. "Let me try negotiating a different deal."

"Fresh meat and blood is what is required for bloodwort fruit," the tree agreed.

"How fresh? Alive and wriggling, or within a day or two of having died?"

Simon sketched a quick sign that meant "the monster's probably not a problem." The words weren't exact, of course. The signs he used were more like "monster" "(negative) danger." The inclination of his hands and head indicated that he was speculating, rather than stating a known fact. The tree seemed to have removed the clause saying the seed-vessel had to be taken to the Hedge, and even if that weren't true, Simon had a hunch that he knew someone who's heart would always be pure. But he wasn't sure, so he let Rey keep going. If she got a better deal, they could eliminate the uncertainty.

And as a child, Simon had always agreed with Grover. There was really no good reason to see the monster at the end of the book.

"Fresh as in newly killed," the tree replied. "Fresh as in juicy, squirming, squirting, tasty and screaming is preferred." The bark around its lipless mouth stretched into a smile for Rey and Simon. He was probably imagining their next meeting.

Simon's distaste for that idea was evident on his face. He didn't bother to sign about it.

Rey turned to look at Simon and Less. "I can't think of any other deal than the one Simon started with - we get someone to swallow the seed within one moon. Less, what do you think?" she signed.

Less risked glancing away from the bushes in which the creature hid. "Sure. That slyph you rescued from the slavers does owe you one," he said quickly before turning back to eye the thorny hedges.

"I think we have a bargain," Simon told the tree.

"The one in which we find a host for your seed before a full turning of the moon," Rey said immediately, "or the effects of fruit on our friend is lost." She found it hard to believe Simon just gave a blanket 'we accept',

and not specifying to which deal they were agreeing to.

"Agreed." The tree stretched out the limb and dropped the fruit into Rey's waiting hands. "Now the sun begins to set. When it dips below the horizon, the demoncats shall emerge from that thicket and come for you. You should run now, changelings. Run or you shall not be able to help your friend or uphold your end of the bargain."

Rover rode swiftly across Hedge paths, briefly down well-used trods, and finally onto a path he knew would lead him to the Hollow. Upon his arrival and entry, the first thing that happened was that the sprite flew right at Belle yelling, "Shoo! Get away! This is not your home! Get out!" Belle covered her head as if she was afraid Auriel was a bat that might get tangled in her hair. But after the old gnome explained Belle was a guest that would help Mizuko, Auriel settled down and instead fluttered off to find them some snacks.

Rover found Mizuko lying next to a fire that had been built at the mouth of her old cave. A boil pot hung from a thick pole suspended above the flames. The nymph herself seemed asleep. A bed of leaves was her only comfort and she lay there shivering and very pale. She didn't rise or open her eyes when Rover arrived, but Auriel informed him that she was awake. The sprite told him that she was only conserving her strength and will respond if he needed her to.

Rover shook his head at that.

"She's got more important things to do, right now, then talk to me. As long as she knows help is on the way, that's the only important thing. Why don't you see what you can do while I gather up some tools for that collar."

With that, he left Belle alone while he went to raid his supplies. The gnome was going to need a fireproof blanket, some hearing protection, a workbench, a vice, some sort of heat-resistant padded material and the best cutting tool he had on hand. Preferably that would be a small, powered grinding wheel or the like. A high-speed rotary device with plenty of spare blades would make short work out of the restraint, but that wasn't likely on this side of the hedge. The best he might be able to come up with for now was likely to be a hacksaw.

Still, he took some time to search the stockpiles that he had on hand. Auriel would make sure that the newcomer would stay out of trouble and he waited for the sprite to return before letting Belle out of his sight. Rover spotted a heavy-duty hacksaw he had on hand. It was something he'd brought in to cut copper plumbing. Motorized anything was always a problem because the Hedge seemed to drain the life out of modern technology more quickly than the mortal realm. Plus there was the inconvenience of not being able to recharge it in the Hedge. However, Rover had long-ago encountered this issue and had several plans in place to re-tool power tools to use magic instead of electrical power. That meant they might not last long in the mortal world, but here they should be okay. Rover didn't care about voided warranties.

The single most useful tool he had was a powered drill. Depending on the bit, he could cut, drill, shape and sand with it. Grinders and sanders can be made to turn with a simple foot pedal. Saws can be moved with a little elbow grease. But turning a hand crank to run power drills got old very quickly. Besides, trying to drill holes in metal with a hand-powered drill was just plain frustrating. Thus, a magically-powered hand drill was his first and so far only tool that had been so extensively modified.

After locating a cutting wheel and tightening it into the drill, Rover covered Belle with a fire blanket to protect her from sparks, then stuffed a leather glove between her neck and the portion of the collar near

where the thick rivet holding it together was located. He was careful and steady, and pulled away many times to allow the metal to cool down as he cut. It took twenty minutes and two cutting wheels to slice through the rivet, but finally it was done. The whole collar came off her intact, but for the cut rivet.

As soon as she felt the heavy thing fall away from her, Belle pushed away the blanket and grappled the gnome in a hug. With the collar gone, it really sank home that she was free. "Thank you, thank you, thank you!" she told Rover. The hug felt very nice, especially how her softer parts pressed against his chest, and to his surprise he felt his long-dormant libido awaken. It was strong enough to fog up his normally razor-sharp mind.

Then the hug was over and the grateful sylph was moving again. She took him by the hand. "Come on. I owe you guys big, and I want to repay you by helping your friend. To do that, I need to take her through a gate from the mortal world into the Hedge. So, I need you to show me a door out that we can use to turn around and come back in. That will trigger my power and I can slow time for us."

Somehow, Rover managed to blush even though his stony, greyish-blue skin. The genuine emotion coming from Belle and her sincerity made him feel a little guilty about the earlier suspicions. Perhaps it was time to cut her a little slack.

"Don't worry about it, 'just trying to help." He managed to say, though his tongue wasn't exactly responding as well as it normally did.

He produced the blindfold, again, so that they could continue to safeguard the location of any door's to the Hollow. Rover actually apologized for it this time, explaining that while Belle seemed trustworthy enough at this point, Rey would likely kill him if he started to get sloppy now. Violating their security wasn't a call he could make on his own.

Once properly prepared, the gnome then led her out and (presumably), back as suited her needs. They had to stop and gather up Mizuko first, of course. It was a testament to how sick she was that she never even asked who Belle was and what they were doing. She just staggered along as best she could, responding to Rover's and Belle's encouragement as best she could.

One step through the Door to Rey's house, Rover leading blindfolded Belle by the hand (her hand felt awfully nice and warm), and then another back again took only a few seconds. The gateway closed and disappeared again as always.

"Done," said Belle. "For every one hour that passes for us, it will be three for the rest of the world. Okay to take off the blindfold?" After Rover gave her the go-ahead, she helped him lead Mizuko back toward her fire and boiling water. Mizuko closed her eyes again and lay down. Belle frowned at her. "She really is sick. What happened to her, Rover?"

Rover took a seat as well, though a part of his mind sought out ways to keep himself occupied. He wasn't the type to relax by doing nothing.

"A vileshrike contaminated her pond." He reported, his tone dry and clinical. "I don't know if she got poisoned when she came through the water, or if there's some deeper connection going on. Just to be careful you probably want to stay away from it.

"We managed to kill the creature, but I haven't had time to check the pond yet. I can only assume that it's still deadly. Once we have her well again I'll look into getting it cleaned up."

"Never heard of a vileshrink, but I'll take your word on it being bad." Belle sat down next to Rover and looked at Mizuko for a couple minutes. "She's really pretty, even though she's sick right now," she remarked idly. "So, you think there might be some kind of connection between her and the spring here? Is she some

kind of water faerie then?"

"Vileshrike." Rover corrected. "As in the bird. Filthy creatures, the remains of its nest is over there. And, yeah, I'm pretty sure she's aligned with water.

"What about you, though? If I had to guess, I'd say Fairest, but I'm better figuring out machines than people. I could be wrong."

"Good guess," Belle replied with a nod. She looked in the direction of the nest. "Maybe I can help get rid of that nest? I still have a little magic left."

"Wait for the others to get here." Rover warned. "Vileshrike are rare, and anything rare is worth something to someone somewhere. I'd hate to think that we dumped a real collector's item just because it was filled with deadly poison."

Belle shrugged. "Okay." She scooted back a little so she was against the wall and then gathered her legs up. Her wings folded in so that they almost disappeared behind her. She rested her head on her knees and relaxed.

A few moments passed in silence. Then Rover looked over at Belle and said "So what was it like? Being royalty, I mean. I've been a craftsman all my life, at least as much of it as I remember. If I was ever anything more than that it was a long, long time ago."

Belle didn't say anything for a long minute and Rover began to think he made her angry or she was ignoring him. She wasn't, though. When she spoke it was like she was far away, searching for things that weren't quite there. "There's a difference between being royalty with power and royalty without power. I was the no power kind. I remember that my Prince married me in Vegas. He promised to keep me and love me and I him, though I guess I'm not sure he actually said "love" in the vow. He then took me away to his kingdom.

"I don't remember a lot of specifics of that time, Rover. I remember that I could have anything I wanted, but he decided for me what it was I wanted. I had closets and closets of dresses and new clothes, but I was only allowed to wear what he wanted. I had riches but could not leave the palace to spend it or give it away or do anything at all. I had servants that saw to my every need, but they couldn't give me what I wanted — my freedom. My Prince couldn't understand why I was unhappy. He had seen to my every need and had brought me all these fine things, and servants and treasure. Things got really bad from there. He was angry at me and blamed me for being unhappy. Then I kept trying to escape when it got so bad I'd rather die than stay... well. You know the rest, I guess."

"The Prince had a lot of servants," she continued after a moment. "Slaves really, I guess. I think they were all human once. If I remember right, he had maids and butlers, garden keepers and stable boys, day laborers and," she looked at him, "craftsmen. Lots of craftsmen. Rover, were you...?"

"Was I...?" Rover waited for her to supply the rest of the question, but apparently that wasn't going to happen. "Forced to work as an engineer? Or do you mean specifically for your prince?"

The little gnome shrugged.

"I'm not sure. I've been free for over half a century now and a lot of work has gone into forgetting everything I went through. For the most part, it wasn't that bad. Not as bad as I think some have it. I know everyone thinks that we Wizend get the worst handlers out there, but trust me. Scientific curiosity does *not* automatically predispose anyone towards the greatest cruelty. That award goes to people actively trying to inflict pain."

Of course, he didn't describe to her the sorts of devices he was engineering. His gift in outfitting torture

rooms and dungeon cells may have spread him the bulk of his ex-master's attentions, but he wasn't proud of how often it was put to use.

Belle thought Rover's situation over. "So, building things is like your favorite thing to do then? Or is it just something you got used to doing, so that's what you do?"

Rover had to think about that for a second.

"I have a feeling I've just always loved inventing. Even before I was taken, I mean. Drawing boards provided me with emotional refuge while I was being forced to work, but I think I was captured in the first place because I was just so damned good at it. I wouldn't still be doing it today, otherwise.

"But what about you? I can't imagine what sort of hobby leads up to bending time itself."

She shrugged. "I don't really remember. I must have picked it up during my time with the Prince. I suppose I was bored a lot. Passing time is easier when you can make time pass for you instead. I just realized that time was a perspective thing. Like, if time passed for a picked flower quickly, then it would wilt right in your hands, right? Or if it didn't have a perspective in time at all, then to everyone else it would be stuck right there, unchanging and unmovable."

"Unchanging, maybe, but immovable is up for debate. Regardless, without magic the only way to change an object's perspective of time is by altering its relative mass through velocity. It sounds to me like you've figured out how to do it just by wishing really, really hard.

"But, hey, I can break machines just by staring at them. It seems to me that magic grants some pretty awesome power just by a deep enough understanding. Once we become aware of the underlying nature of things, then manipulating that nature is a snap."

"It seems that way. But there just doesn't seem to be much money in the stuff I can do. I mean, here. Check this out." She searched about for a small stick. Once she had a suitable piece she stuck the end of it in the fire until it had a good flame going at one end. Then she held it up between the two of them. Suddenly, the flame froze. She let go of the stick and it hung absolutely still in the air. "There. Try to move it."

Rover had the opportunity to do all kinds of experiments, but no matter what he did, he could not move the stick. He couldn't even break it or blow out the frozen flame. It just simply hung there frozen in time and space.

"Kind of neat, huh?" She shrugged. "I have yet to think of an actual use for it other than practical jokes."

Rover stroked his beard as he continued to stare at the stick.

"Fascinating. Reducing it to zero activity on the subquantum level should preclude it from interacting with the universe at all. But, instead, it seems to be anchored in multiple points in time at only in a single point in space. At least from our point of view, which just isn't possible. Especially the fire. Superheated gas *might* have enough of a higgs mechanism to give it some degree of absolute mass, but without the radiated heat energy should it even be visible?"

The gnome reached forward to touch the flame, checking it for any warmth at all.

"But that's magic for you." He shrugged. "If it weren't impossible then it'd just be a parlor trick. Plus, it doesn't surprise me that it's hard to turn a profit with. Magic doesn't like whore itself out, that's a job for science. Even my repairs are temporary unless I do them the old fashioned way, and who's going to pay for a 24 hour patch job?"

"Still, being able to freeze a guard or an opponent for even a couple of minutes could be a huge advantage in anything from a fight, to a jail break or even bank job."

Belle sighed. "Sometimes I wish I *could* affect people like that. If I could, I sure wouldn't have been stuck in that slave collar. But I don't have the power to freeze a person in time. Funny you should mention jail breaks or bank jobs. You have something in mind?"

Once again, Rover shrugged.

"In our line of work? You never know when a good jail break is going to come in handy. And if our line of work doesn't pan out then the same can be said about bank jobs. A gnome has to make a living, after all, and there are better ways of doing it than mending shoes."

Belle took that in, and then asked, "Your line of work? Do you mean like your friends' and you? What do you guys do, aside from saving each other from poisoning?"

"Making trouble for the Goblin King." Rover stated, flatly. "Though we haven't exactly been as focused on that as I'd like. We've had a few distractions, lately, but I'm hoping to get everyone going in that direction as soon as possible."

"I'm guessing that's one of the Fae with capital F. What happened? I mean, usually it's not changelings looking to mix it up with the Fae. It's the other way 'round."

"*His* soldiers raided *my* workshop." Rover seemed fairly upset at the indignity. " 'Made off with some of my best inventions and now he's doing god-knows-what with them. Anyone who gets harmed by them... well... I can't help but feel guilty. I know I shouldn't, but we're talking about things that I invented, that I put together and that I let fall into the hands of bastards."

Rover didn't mention that he'd sworn nobody would ever be hurt again by something he designed, not after his years in captivity. The Goblin King had made a liar out of him, though.

"That's going to cost him. Somehow, I'm getting my gear back and making them pay dearly for their use."

"Wow," Belle said. "That guy sounds like a real ass-hat."

Mizuko moaned and moved a little. She choked, coughed and then spat out some blood. She opened her eyes and looked around. She must not have remembered Belle from earlier because she looked startled briefly, then ignored her again. "*Rover? Is it afternoon yet? Ollie gets hungry in the afternoon but he can't have the fish in the spring. I need to find something for him.*" She placed her hands on the floor and pushed until she could get her feet under her, then tried to stand. She swayed dangerously near the fire then sort of tossed herself back toward the wall and caught her fall with a hand. She started to make her way along the wall.

Belle stood up, blinking from the distracting and entrancing effect of Mizuko's *voice*. "Hey uh, I don't think you should be doing that." Mizuko gave her such a cold look, Belle recoiled a step instead of grabbing Mizuko's arm as she had intended.

"Hey now, none of that." Rover took advantage of Belle's backward step to step between the two. It was a little difficult breaking their eye contact with each other when he normally had to jump up and down just to get their attention.

" 'Zuko, you're still sick. This is Belle. She's helping you get better, so why don't you go lay down while we find something for Ollie to eat?"

She seemed to be shifting towards delirium and Rover knew that could make her very difficult to handle. All things like reasoning, self restraint and common sense tended to evaporate in the face of grave trauma. He hoped that they wouldn't be forced to sedate her before long.

Mizuko looked at him, trying to make sense of what he was telling her. Finally, she nodded and used the wall to lower herself back down.

A fluttering at the corner of his eye caught Rover's attention. It was Auriel and she had a couple tiny cans of cat food. One was marked as salmon and gravy and the other was tuna. "She keeps these as treats," Auriel said, "in the tree on the far bank." She held them out for Rover.

"Thanks." Rover accepted the food. "Hopefully you mean for Ollie."

The gnome remembered visiting Mizuko's home not very long ago. Given how she lived back then, it wouldn't surprise him in the least to learn she'd acquired a taste for the cheap stuff.

"I'll get him fed. You two make sure she doesn't wander off. Ollie doesn't have a litter box I need to worry about, does he?"

Auriel shook her head, then drifted over near Mizuko. She folded her arms and hovered with fluttering wings watching the sick nymph.

Rover had to spend some time looking for the elusive little otter, calling his name and scrabbling around rocks. He finally found the little guy hidden in some rocks about halfway up the path leading to the Hedge exit. He was curled up but raised his head to watch Rover as the gnome approached. Ollie was normally shy so it wasn't a surprise he was hard to find. Today he seemed lethargic, showing none of the bounding energy he seemed to have whenever Rover saw him around Mizuko. The little guy looked so miserable with his coat dry and scruffy. But when Rover peeled open the canned food, Ollie took interest and ate hungrily.

When Rover returned, Mizuko was laying on her leaf-bed again, but her eyes were open and watching Belle. Auriel was banging a little stone pestle in a stone bowl to grind up some leafy things. She had a couple little jars of other herbs next to her, as well.

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Less paused next to a towering statue of something that could only be described as a winged dolphin - if by dolphin you meant one of those grotesque things that used to appear on old mariner's charts. His chest heaved with ragged breaths. The yowling of the demoncats as the sun approached the horizon was still echoing in his ears and would haunt his nights for some time to come. He checked the crumpled map for the next landmark. "We still need to get the other two plants," he gasped.

"We'd better get to it," Rey replied, herself taking slow even breaths to recover.

Between breaths, Simon said "Back to Mythic. I'll take care of it."

"You sure we have the time to split up?" Rey asked.

"We should have this discussion while moving," Simon said. "We should go to the fastest way home we can find. I can trade with Queen Cassandra for the other two fruits-- at least enough for Mizuko now. If it turns out to be faster to split up, we should do it then. For now, we stick together."

Less nodded and pushed himself upright from the statue. "We need a lot of raincup to neutralize the poison in the pond. If we see any we should stop to harvest. This way." He pointed with his umbrella and moved off down the path at a quick walk.

Rey followed, her eyes scanning for potential dangers.

Simon took a moment to call on his Contracts of Spring to erase the fatigue of the road from himself and his friends. He was pretty sure, now, that he'd have enough glamour to get through the rest of the day. Enough time, though, he wasn't sure of at all. If they could walk faster and be more alert, so much the better.

By some stroke of luck or fate they ran into no further trouble from Hedge denizens, although growls and occasional movement from denser portions of the Hedge hinted that the demoncats were still stalking them. They hurried along and tried to keep an eye out from the remaining goblin fruit Mizuko required, but between the darkening sky and the need to keep moving away from the hunting beasts it was very difficult.

It was far less time consuming to use a Gate or Door they knew than to try to pick a specific entry into Mythic. That meant tracing their way back to the motley hollow and using one of the Doors from there was still faster than trying to find one of Less's Doors.

At last they found themselves at the Hedge-side Door to the hollow.

Simon looked around to find Mizuko, Rover, or Auriel. "We're back. We've got the bloodwort," he said. He made for Mizuko's cave as quickly as he could, to see if his healing arts would buy Mizuko a bit more time for him to go bargain with his Queen.

"I think that Less and I should go with you, Simon," Rey said. "A united front, so to speak. There's going to be a price to pay, and if there's three of us, we can spread it around."

"Gonna need your car anyway," Simon said. "Mine's near the Market."

It appeared that Less, Simon and Rey's arrival had interrupted some conversation between Rover and Belle. Belle stood up. "Hey," she said by way of greeting.

Simon knelt next to Mizuko who was looking much worse than earlier. She was shaking, even though she was covered in blankets now. He tried to heal the damage the poison was doing to her body, but his power flickered and failed.

By Rover's reckoning, he'd left the others three and a half hours ago. In that time, Mizuko had grown steadily worse. At a guess, she might have one or two hours left. Since Belle had reported she'd slowed time for them here in the Hollow to one third normal, then that meant the others had been searching the Hedge for at least ten hours.

"Oh my god, I almost forgot again." Rey frantically searched through her backpack and pulled out a small container. "I found this when I was going through my stuff before we left. It might be pretty close to, well, being overripe." She popped the lid open and withdrew a single purple berry that had obviously seen better days.

Rey knelt next to Mizuko and carefully fed the goblin fruit to her friend. "Hang on, Miz," she whispered. "We're going to beat this."

"Time to go," Simon said, giving Mizuko's hand a squeeze. "We'll be back as fast as we can." He got up and headed for Rey's exit, pulling out his cell phone as he neared the Door.

"This is really bad," said Less quietly as he followed the others to the door. "Mizuko is the only one who

knows how to brew the antidote from the plants. Even if we do get the raincup and valeburrow in time, she can barely sit up much less follow a complicated occult recipe!"

"Then we see what goblin fruit we can score," Rey said with a frown. "I'm not a complete noob when it comes to the occult. If she can tell me what to do, then I'll do it for her."

Mizuko had slowly chewed, then swallowed the little blushberry Rey had offered her. She sighed and strengthened enough to prop herself up and look at her friends. *"I do not want to die," she said. "If there is a price for these things, I will pay it."*

Rover heard Belle mutter, "Freaky when she talks like that."

"No," Rey replied firmly. "You need to rest as much as you can. Even if you're not able to make the antidote yourself, you need the strength to tell us so we can do it for you." She leaned forward to whisper something in Mizuko's ear.

In response to the whisper, Mizuko grabbed Rey's arm. *"I will rest, Rey. But know that if they ask a price, I am willing to pay it whether I am there or not. In this matter, I am naming you — all of you — my proxy if needed. The bloodwort was probably hardest to find and I am sorry I did not think to tell you this before if you bargained for it instead of searched for it. Now my time grows short, I know and you may not have the time to search for the remaining things I need. So, if you must bargain for it, I give you leave to bargain in my name."*

Rey nodded. "I'll do my best to make sure it's a fair deal." She leaned in and gave Mizuko a kiss on the cheek. "We'll be as fast as we can."

Simon was back in the mortal world. He dialed the Queen's number from memory and moved through Rey's sad little house to pace on the front walk.

Less felt very comfortable in Rey's home. The stark, uncluttered spaces let him breathe a little more deeply after the chaos that was the goblin world. While waiting for Simon to connect with the Spring Queen he wandered quietly through the small house and trailed his fingers along the smooth off-white walls. He stopped suddenly when he encountered a jarring reminder of their situation. Mizuko had crashed through the back door, wounded by the assassin's bullet, and had fallen to her knees on the tiled corridor. His eyes traced the story of her stumbling haste to get to the door to the hollow. Bloody handprints climbed up the walls and streaked towards him. Dark circles of blood trailed behind, now dry. Now distant from the hunt for the bloodwort tree and the escape of the demoncats, the sadness of her predicament seeped into his soul. She could die in a few scant hours. And tomorrow. Tomorrow, there would be no patient explanations of human manners, of dress codes, or personal grooming. No fatherly advice to give. Accepting tears, he bathed in those sad memories, heightened by emotion.

Simon's call went through immediately. "Simon!" said the woman on the other end of the line. It was the unnamed woman who'd answered the Queen's phone the last time he'd called. She sounded rather pleased. "How nice to hear from you again."

"Thank you," Simon said. Though he longed to rush ahead, he forced himself to be calm, congenial, and polite. "You as well. If Queen Cassandra is available, I need to meet with her again. I and two friends would like to bargain for raincup and valeburrow, and we have very little time left. Minutes, not hours."

That last admission went against Simon's instincts, but Cassandra was no fool. She'd know the urgency just from the fact Simon needed to ask. Admitting it from the outset might garner him a shred of sympathy.

"I'm so sorry. It sounds like an emergency, but the queen is somewhat indisposed." The woman was tempted to hang up, but she must have detected the undertone of desperation in Simon's voice so she added, "Are

you quite certain this meeting is necessary?"

"I know the goblin fruits are necessary, and I have maybe an hour before Mizuko is too far gone to save," Simon said.

There was a disappointed sigh on the other end of the line. "Very well, Simon. I'll tell her about the raincup and valeburrow. If she decides to honor your request she'll see you at your new club in half an hour." The woman then hung up.

As Simon's call was concluded, he was joined by Rey and Less.

"Oh, this is going to cost me," Simon murmured. He looked up from the inert phone and said "We need to be at glasshouse in half an hour. I'm going to call and get the back stage lounge closed of for us."

"Is she bringing the plants?" asked Less. Simon's tone on the phone did not suggest that this was a sure thing. "If she doesn't we would have been better off foraging around Mizuko's hollow."

Simon looked up from dialing, "She knows how urgent it is. I didn't get to ask, but I'm sure she'll bring them."

—

Rover had watched them all going through their frantic business before speaking, but he opened up now that they were about to leave to finish the quest.

"How far does your time effect go, Belle? I've been learning a bit about foraging, myself, lately. If you keep me covered while I have a look around here then it might not matter if Cass doesn't cough up what we need."

"It's dark out," Belle pointed out. "You might get eaten by something you can't see."

"Well, if you gotta go you should be fine," Belle said. She meant he'd have the time he needed while she kept the 1/3rd time going for her and Mizuko. "I don't think my power extends that far beyond where I am. I can't be sure."

"Hrm. I was hoping for the benefit of some extended time. I'll see if I can find the effect's edge and stick close to that. As for predators..."

Belle assured him that if could get away from her effect, then every 60 minutes he spent would only be 20 minutes to her and Mizuko. She just didn't know how far out her effect extended. Normally, during the rare times she employed her power, she had only found it useful to do the reverse — so she could get in a good eight hours rest in the Hedge, where only a couple hours would really have passed in the mortal realm. Thus, she really hadn't experimented with it to know the limitations. She was just glad to repair the motley for its kindness to her by given Mizuko a better chance at survival than she had before.

Rover went over to Ollie's snack tree. Hopefully those weren't the last two cans of cat food stored inside as a few of those might be an excellent distraction for anything trying to eat the little gnome. After all, he was likely to be tough and stringy where the commercial tins were manufactured to be a little more appetizing.

He found three more cans in the little bag, and thus armed he ventured forth into the Hedge to look for goblin fruit.

In his first foray, Rover managed to find something edible. It was a little clutch of coupnettle, a plant that he knew acted as a kind of stimulant of sorts to changelings. It was minty, and usually steeped as tea, but it

could be eaten raw, too. It wasn't a restorative or healing herb, but Rover had picked up that Mizuko's metabolism was different from other changelings. Any goblin fruit seemed to revive her both physically and magically.

When he returned to the Hollow, he discovered that less than 15 minutes had passed to Belle and Mizuko. He gave what he'd found to Mizuko and ventured out again. This time, he narrowly avoided running into serious trouble. A stand of trees near where he'd stopped to rest and look around a bit turned out to be the lower legs of a huge spider. He avoided a grisly and lonely demise by opening and tossing the catfood he'd brought with at the thing. As he had hoped, it stopped to investigate the strong-smelling stuff and he slipped away from the spider's ambush. Rover had decided to return but stumbled across a small thimble plant. Thimblebulbs were what the fruit were called. They were a meaty kind of thing and not very juicy. Nor did it have any particular properties other than being edible. It would have to do.

—

Rey drove Less and Simon out to Glasshouse in her used 2000 Ford Fusion. It's previous owner had it painted ochre, with a red interior. While used, it had been treated well and there was low mileage and no rust. It was small, comfortable, but not fancy. It got them to where they needed to go.

Simon could tell the lot and street-side parking around the club was more full than it had been on a Wednesday work night. Business seemed to be picking up and that was a good thing.

The trio were able to walk straight inside since there were no bands this night and thus no cover charge. Past the double-doors at the entry there was a coat room off to the left. Beyond that another door made an attempt to hold back the thundering sound of club music. The group didn't intend to be here long, so they walked straight inside. The main floor of the club had tables and other seating surrounding a dance floor upon which several scattered couples and small groups gyrated to the DJ's tunes.

"Looks good," Rey said as she took in the area around her. Clubs were never her thing, but that didn't mean she couldn't appreciate the work put into making a successful one.

"Thanks." Simon could barely hear over the throbbing music. "This way. The backstage lounge is soundproofed." He led the way to the office and around the dance floor to the private room. Along the way, he stopped to make sure the bouncers and hostesses knew Cass MacArthur was coming and to call Simon as soon as she arrived and to escort her to the lounge if she didn't want to wait.

The backstage lounge was empty. Simon used his cell phone to turn down the music and tune the monitors into the security channel. Rover and his manager had showed him how to do both with varying levels of patience. One of the hostesses had brought in a fruit tray, probably purchased from the 24-hour grocery down the street. It would have to do.

Simon sat down at a table and asked, "So, what areas willing to pay? Queen Cassandra has always been reasonable, even generous. But I don't know what she'll do now. It doesn't help that I interrupted her rest, or worse yet something she was doing, when I called."

"What is she likely to ask for?" Rey looked between Less and Simon. "You both know her better than I do."

"Couldn't say," said Less. "She's more True Fey than changeling now. She used to use the Bleak Seal to set up changelings fresh out of the Hedge with new identities, hide them from pursuers, or help them get out of town. She might ask for pro bono work of some kind, or some favour for the Court."

"That'd be my guess, too," Simon said. "She might come in with a complete low-ball, just a token payment because she never gives away anything for free. But she's got basically one of our lives to bargain with, so I expect the price to be pretty high. Something like one major favor within the next Season. I wish I knew more what would impress her because then we could come up with an offer that she'll like, but that we can pay without too much sacrifice. Something like promising to find a suitable Winter King before two winters pass, and presenting him to the Queen so she gets to sponsor him for his position."

"Why would she care about whether or not there is a Winter King?" Rey asked. Her question was a serious one, as she wondered if a monarch would willingly reduce the amount of time their season ruled - unless she expected to hold some sway over the new Winter ruler.

"I'm not sure she would." Simon thought for a second. "But I bet Queen Veridia does. When the Emerald Queen arrived, she threw out the balance that had reigned here for years before. King Jeremiah took the opportunity to ally with her and thus weaken Autumn... Although I think he didn't get quite what he expected. Now Autumn is the minority, and the only way to get even... without doing something really stupid... is to bring in a Winter King."

"Actually, that's a pretty good idea," Simon continued. "If Queen Veridia is kept down too long, she'll start to lose perspective and be in more danger of actually doing something stupid. A Winter King to balance out the factions again would be good for the whole Duchy. But only if he comes in with a good bit of power and support, and with an agenda to make peace. If the new King of Winter is a bastard, or if Queen Veridia tries to use him as a political instrument, things just turn a new shade of ugly."

Simon shrugged. "But like I said, I don't know that Queen Cassandra does care, so I'm not sure the offer would work."

"I'm not sure I like the way you're characterizing the Queen of Autumn," Rey said, keeping her anger in check. "Do you know my Queen well enough to make that kind of statement?"

"Please," interrupted Less. "You can settle these matters later. Winter chooses its king or queen so there is no point asking for one. Since Cassandra is being asked to save a life, she would be far more likely (if we can presume to understand her Fey logic) to ask for that life in return. She might ask Mizuko to change her Court allegiance."

"She might," Simon said. "She asked me earlier if I thought I could get Mizuko to change Courts. And unless Mizuko is really misinformed, that'd be a bad thing. And yes, I do know Queen Veridia well enough to guess what political pressures she's dealing with and what things she *might* want to do about them. I'm alive today because I can infer that kind of thing from available evidence. I didn't say she *would* do something stupid, or that I was *certain* that she was hoping to find a good candidate for a Winter King. But it's one of the things I'd consider if I were in her place."

Rey decided not to make any further comments about politics. "I doubt Mizuko will be willing to change Courts. Her loyalties are deep."

"She's not here anyway," Simon said. "I don't think Queen Cassandra would try to make the whole Motley change Courts, so that's not too big a worry. At least I hope not. I think the worst we have to worry about on that front is something like a good neighbor pledge. As much as I can expect anything, I expect a one-time service. We should consider boundaries. Like I'd rather not go on a mission to kill someone. If someone dies in a fight, I can live with that, but I'm not a murderer. If that's what it takes to save Mizuko... I might agree, but take the consequences for failure instead or something."

"Nor am I willing to do something that would compromise my loyalties," Rey offered, "or be expected to do something beyond my reasonable expectations of success."

Simon's phone buzzed to life. A quick check showed him a text message from Ruth, one of the hostesses. It said that Cassandra and company had arrived and had been directed to this room. A quick glance at monitors showed the a very attractive blonde woman at the entrance wearing in a club dress in fall colors of dark grey and orange. Her hair was up in a complicated style that left blonde curls dangling around the sides of her face. Most of her hair was bound up and held in place by a shining silver clip but the remainder cascaded down her neck. She wore matching, five-inch heels and made walking in them look completely natural. She looked... perfect. It was that very perfection that caught Simon's eye and made him guess that this could be none other than the mortal mask of his queen.

Her companion was a woman with dark, perhaps black, hair. She wore a dress as well, and had curves that drew the eye and made men imagine what it might be like to explore them. But her face was turned away from the camera so Simon couldn't recognize her. If she was a changeling, she'd reinforced her Mask as well.

Cassandra was looking directly into the camera, a slight smile on her lips. Her image grew, as if the camera was zooming in on her, but it wasn't. It was like she was getting closer to the camera — which was mounted fifteen above the floor. It made the hair on the back of Rey's neck raise, icy fear filled Less's heart, and goosebumps appeared up and down Simon's body. It was fucking freaky.

"Hello, Simon."

Everyone jumped. The activity on the camera had so captured the attention of all three changelings in the lounge, no one had expected the silent arrival of their guest. Cassandra stood at the doorway to the lounge looking exactly as she did on camera.

Simon and Rey glanced instantly back at the monitor, but Cassandra didn't appear on any of them now. Nor did her dark-haired companion.

Simon recovered his composure enough to say "Hello, your Majesty. I appreciate your agreeing to see me on such short notice, and I certainly regret the inconvenience. I believe you already know Less Seleman, and this is Rey Brambleblush." He found that pure reflex had led him to stand, bow to his Queen, and gesture to each of his companions in turn.

Rey tried hard not to stare at Cassandra, and she waited for the Emerald Queen to speak again.

"I knew Simon's motley held people from many different seasons." She nodded at the winter courtier. "Less, always good to see you. I'm pleased to meet you, Rey Brambleblush."

"A pleasure, Your Majesty." Rey paused for half a second before saying "Lyla Clairborne wishes me to assure you she respects the boundaries she agreed to when the two of you last spoke."

Less stood quickly upon the arrival of the Queen and gave her a deep bow of respect, but said nothing.

Simon wondered briefly who Lyla Clairborne was and what she had to do with his Queen, but now was not the time to find out. "I have drinks and refreshments, your majesty," he said, taking a step toward the bar. Or since my urgent need called you away from other matters, I will take no offense if you wish to get to business immediately."

Cassandra had considered Rey for a moment at mention of Clairborne, then her head had inclined slightly in a nod. She turned her attention to Simon and softly spoke. "It was my understanding your business was urgent. Though I'd normally be very unhappy for having my plans for the evening spoiled, I thought there was a good chance you'd call again, considering our conversation earlier today. To business then.

"Simon, is this room monitored?"

Simon pushed some buttons on his phone. "Not anymore," he said.

The Queen smiled and said "Thank you."

The Spring Queen looked at everyone's face in turn. "Were you able to acquire the bloodwort, then?"

"We were," Rey said with a nod.

"But not the others, thus the request. I have the valeburrow and raincup you requested, though I don't know how much you need. It is difficult and very costly to successfully transplant them."

Less knew that not only was making Hedge plants grow in transplanted conditions costly in terms of personal sacrifice that was often needed, the lore on the care of goblin fruit-bearing plants was difficult and often expensive to come by, even for Autumn witches who specialized in such things.

Cassandra found a stool and sat down. "I wish I could give the things you need to save your friend's life. All life is important to me, even a life that serves one that has opposed me so strongly since I came to my throne. But I can't."

She looked directly at Rey. "You are member of the Leaden Mirror. I'm sure you will understand I hold no ill will toward you. You and your friend have my heartfelt sympathy. Still, if word got around that I freely gave you something that cost me blood and a portion of my will to create, I would have demands made of me that I could not fulfill.

"And I don't like making demands of someone who can't refuse. It's abusive. It's wrong. A dying person will agree to anything. To put it crudely, my bargaining position is absolute. Too powerful." *And therefore not much fun.* She didn't say it aloud, but it was implied in her words and her tone. "Since I know time is of the essence for you, let us dispense with haggling, shall we? I can't afford not to set a price, and you can't afford not to agree to anything I ask, or your friend's life is forfeit.

"Who here speaks for her? Is there someone here that can agree to an offer on her behalf?"

"We all can," Rey replied. "Before we left Mizuko to come here, she granted the three of us her proxy." She understood why Cassandra had to ask for payment; in fact, she would have been surprised if she hadn't. Perhaps, then, things might not go quite as badly as Rey feared. She looked at her companions. "I'll do the negotiating, if you have no objections." Rey was responsible for Mizuko's getting shot, so it was the least she could do.

Simon nodded his acquiescence and stepped back. Less also gave his assent and found a seat on a nearby chesterfield to watch the interaction.

Rey quickly signed "Thank you" and turned her attention back to the Queen of Spring.

"Then in return for what I have of the items you asked for, I ask that she returns a favor to me when next I ask."

"Provided the favor does not involve murder," Rey said, "compromising her loyalties and is something she can reasonably expected to be able to accomplish."

"I don't have the time or energy to bind every minor courtier that comes along and asks a favor of me," Cassandra stated. She was right, of course. There was a hard limit to the number of pledges that any changeling could bind with the Wyrd, and that limit could be quickly reached by those in power. "The favor will be of like value and importance. This is a promise, not a pledge that you make on her behalf. If she

chooses not to return the favor, then it will be known what I have provided and why, and that she refused to repay the favor. That should be consequence enough." The queen showed her savvy again by pointing out the social consequences. If a person was known to break their promises, they'd have a good deal of trouble securing such things, or even being trusted, by members of the freehold.

"Agreed," Rey replied, knowing Mizuko would do her best to do the favor when asked.

"A blue gym bag is in the coat room. You'll find what you need there. I didn't know how much you'd want, so you have all of it," Cassandra said.

Rey nodded her thanks and said to her friends "I'll get the bag. Did you want to come with to Mizuko, or do you have things that need to be done elsewhere first?"

"Oh no," Simon said. "I'm seeing this all the way to the end." Then he stepped back over to Cassandra and said "Your Majesty, I am very grateful that I returned to Mythic City to find you as my sovereign. We have to go, but you... and your companion? are welcome to stay as long as you like. The drinks will be free. It's only a pittance, but all I have to offer right now. Perhaps I'll meet the mysterious Jo on the way out?"

"As will I," said Less. He stood and brushed the wrinkles from his trousers. "Queen Cassandra," he said as he bowed to her on his way out.

The queen blinked at Simon. "Simon, I came alone tonight. Jo is not here."

"Really," Simon said. "I thought I saw you come in with a dark haired lady. Maybe she just happened to come in the same time you did." He didn't really care much. Despite the magical boost back in the Hedge, Simon was getting tired and just wanted this day and its trials to be finished.

The trio hurried through the sparsely populated dance club to find the promised duffel. As they passed the bar, Less noticed the staff bringing cases of beer to refill the fridge. "Say, Simon?" he shouted over the din of the music. "Do you mind if I borrow one of those hand trucks tonight?"

First the buckshot box, now a hand truck. Simon mentally bowed to Less as the master of non sequitur. "I guess that'd be okay," he said. "Kinda hard to get it into Rey's car." Then something occurred to him. "Is this for the vileshrike? I bought a wheelbarrow for the Hollow. It's in my garage back home."

"The trolley would be better. It will go easily into the back seat. I don't mind sitting with it." Less made his detour and snatched the 2-wheeler while the staff member was filling the fridge. He jogged with it across the dance floor to catch up to the others.

Simon left a quick and technically truthful explanation with Ruth on the way out and promised he'd have it back soon.

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The trio returned to the Hollow to find an exhausted Rover sitting with Mizuko, who looked much better compared to the way she was before they'd left. Mizuko quickly signed an explanation that told her friends her body metabolizes goblin fruit so well, even mundane fruit with no special properties will cause her to recover most injuries. Therefore, she prefers it above mortal food any day. The poison was still working against her, but she wasn't on the brink of death, thanks to Rover braving the Hedge alone to gather a few edibles.

The gym bag had been stuff full of raincup and valeburrow, much to the nymph's relief. She put the motley to work right away. Since there was plenty, she had them build a second campfire and started water boiling there. Following her precise procedure, made much quicker by giving everyone a task to complete, they were able to make what Mizuko needed, as well as a powerful purification power to cleanse the spring. The effect on Mizuko was gradual, but by the time the motley had added the mixture to the spring, she was on her feet.

Belle had dropped her time-warping effect once the motley began work on the cure so that they wouldn't end up working all through the night and miss their chance to rest before a new day was upon them.

Less was able to collect the corpse of the vileshrike and cart it off to the 13th Street Market. The merchant was quite pleased with the completion of another successful deal. By the time he returned from the market, the others had finished the cleanup at the cave.

Belle stood by Rover and was saying, "I always feel awkward about goodbyes." She cleared her throat. "Thanks everyone for getting me out of that sucky situation at the market. I'm glad I was able to repay that kindness and help with Mizuko. It's been a hell of a long day for me, though, so I guess I better start looking for a way home. I gathered Mythic City was near here? If you can point me or lead me to a door out, I'll make my way to a bus station."

Mizuko said, *"Your abilities saved my life as much as the efforts and sacrifices of my friends. Your effort will not be forgotten."*

Once Simon shook off Mizuko's entrancement, he said "Oh... yeah. If you worry about stuff like that, we're completely even. In fact, if you need some help in the future, look me up." His chivalrous instincts said he should see Belle off, but practically, he figured Rey would want to do it. The Door was in her house, so she should be in charge of how it was used.

Less produced his silver folding case and flicked out one of his hand-lettered calling cards. He presented it to Belle. "If you need anything for your journey, please contact me. I specialize in newcomers to Mythic. Clothing, identification, safe passage." Rover had told a good story of how eager the 'princess' had been to help and so he was ready to accept her story on spec. However, her arrival had been too much of a coincidence for him. Assassin, vileshrike, and ... damsel in distress? He knew too well that the fey dealt it out in threes. If he had been the one to bring her to the Hollow, she would have been slowing time from inside the magic bottle. A friend of Rover's was a friend of his, but you couldn't be too careful.

"Thanks," Belle said with a smile. She took his card and looked at it. "Really, I'm more of a newcomer to Vegas, if anything. New returner? Whatever."

"How did you end up in the market?" Rey asked, unwilling to let Belle go without asking a few more questions.

She winked at Rey. "Shopping, of course."

Rey watched Belle for a moment, then signed to the rest of her motley "I don't want her to leave through my house. She needs a different way out, preferably one that will disorient her and make it harder for her to find her way back here to the Hollow. Or tell anyone else where it is."

"I'll take her," signed Less. By rights he should be dead tired by now, but the Spring energy that Simon had provided after their escape from the bloodwort tree and their subsequent refreshments made him chipper.

"Thanks," Rey signed in return. "See if you can find out how she got into the 13th Street Market. I didn't think there were entrances from places outside of Mythic. Unless she was stumbling through the Hedge looking

for it." Rey avoided looking at Belle while her fingers moved.

Though deep in his elemental core he didn't much care for human interactions, his brain recognized the connection Rover and Belle had made. He gave them time to fare each other well.

"Well, tempus fugit. Follow me, Belle. I'll take you to the bus station, or the train station, if you prefer." Less walked to the cliff face and pried open his Door that connected this hollow to his own network. He took a meandering and deliberately confusing path through the Hedge-tunnels and secret passes he knew.

"Does the Las Vegas freehold really have no goblin market of their own?" asked Less. Their bodies were warm from walking and he held aside long rope-like roots so she could pass. "I wasn't aware that Mythic was a changeling tourist destination."

Belle laughed and smiled at him as she ducked under the roots. "Really? With all the kind and handsome changelings such as yourself in residence, why wouldn't the Mythic community be a popular place?"

"Hmph. Flattery will get you far in changeling society but I am well aware of my own reality. We are kind because seeming so suits our purposes for the time being."

"Ouch," Belle responded. "But I don't believe it. How did it suit your purpose to save me from getting auctioned off to the highest bidder?"

"Because the Summer King wants to crack down on the slave trade. Ignoring a changeling on the blocks would look bad on us when we are trying to make a name for ourselves in the freehold. And when we heard the proceeds were going to the hob we were looking for, it was a solid lead we couldn't pass up," Less explained. Then he added, "That, and Simon can't seem to walk past a naked woman without throwing down money."

"Oh," Belle replied, a little downcast. "I see."

She changed the subject. "She wanted you to find out, didn't she? The flowering woodblood you were making those weird hand signals with?"

"She did, but only because of the attempted assassination on Mizuko. We must think of security and you being at the market is the troublesome part of your story."

Belle sighed. "I'm not going to tell you *how* I got here. You guys have secret paths you take, and so do I. I'll tell you *why*, but not because she wants me to." She stopped in the path and turned to Less. In the dark, they were both reduced to dim outlines and it was hard to make out each other's faces.

She squinted in his direction. "It's because I think most of you are basically really nice people. The Vegas freehold sucks. They call it the Emerald Palace by the way and it's run by the Spring Court. All year round. The Emerald King won't tolerate any of the other courts ruling. It's all about Desire, I guess. For money. For lust. For everything that's... well Vegas. The King has personally taken the field against a couple True Fae that decided to move in on Vegas turf, so everybody knows he's a tough sonofabitch. Most folks don't complain about his policies too loudly.

"I'm courtless. The *smart* choice, I suppose, is to cave and join up with Spring, but I'm getting pretty sick of the fringe life I'm stuck with. I'm keeping my options open, which so far is marginally better than being another fairest newbie in the Emerald King's court."

Less listened with a frown. "Mythic was very recently very much the same way - ruled by Summer alone. I guess it is the fey compulsion for the unchanging and the mortal desire to cling to power that causes them to forget that it is the changing of the seasons that keeps the True Fey at arm's length."

Less could not help bringing the subject back around on her. He was envious of Belle's secret path between Vegas and Mythic. "Belle, I deal in information. I could provide you with a new identity if you reveal to me how you got to Mythic. If it is a hidden Trod then it would be very useful to me and my work."

"It is hidden, yes indeed," Belle agreed. "But why would you want some secret path to get to a market in Vegas? I can tell you from experience it didn't work out so great for me. Next time, I'm taking the bus. Or if I don't have money for that, I'm just going to go through the main Hedge paths. You could do the same thing."

"Anyway, Vegas is my home. The situation sucks, but it's home, you know? It's what I know. There I am who I am. I don't need another identity. I think that if I learned anything on this little adventure, it's that."

"Some things just need to pass unseen," he said simply. "If you ever find you need to change who you are, you can come back to look us up. I'm sure Rover, and the rest of us, would be very glad to see you."

By this time, Less had opened the door to the mortal realm. They were assailed by the foul, damp odour of Mythic's storm drain system. He led the unfortunate creature through several more confusing turns in the pitch blackness of the tunnels before his hand found the ladder he was looking for. Once he pushed back the manhole Belle found herself a short walk from the bus station. Less offered her a few bills to help with the trip.

She took the money then aimed and planted a kiss on Less's cheek. "Thanks." She turned away and walked toward the bus.

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As Less dealt with Belle, Simon looked around for Auriel. The sprite was usually pretty easy to find because of her chain. But then he decided he'd better find out if his crazy idea would even work first. He snagged two water bottles from the cooler and went over to Mizuko. "Can we go talk somewhere for a minute?" he asked her.

She looked at him, the water bottles and then deadpanned, "*Why Simon. Are you trying to ask me out for a drink?*"

The unexpected humor took Simon a second, then he smiled at her joke. "I'd think you get that kind of thing from smitten young gentlemen all the time. I have beers, too, but you've just recovered from a deadly poison today, so I thought we'd start slow." He held out a hand for her. "Shall we?"

She looked at his hand and raised an eyebrow. She walked past him to the front of the cave and waited for him there, sending him a message by doing so that she didn't think very much of the chivalry thing.

Simon shrugged and followed her. If she wouldn't give him the pleasure of physical contact, at least he'd get the enjoyment of watching her ass. They settled on the other side of the pool from the cave entrance, sitting on a large rock. Simon handed Mizuko one of the water bottles and opened his own.

"I've got this crazy idea," he said. "I wanted to see if it would even work before I made a big thing about it. We've got to give someone that bloodwort seed, and I was thinking that in a way, whoever we give it to is saving your life. So then I thought if Auriel agreed to take it, that might be enough to cancel out her pledge debt."

"We'd have to decide how likely she is to have a pure heart first, but if we did, can you tell me if that'd work?"

Mizuko blinked at Simon in surprise. It wasn't a question she expected. "I'm not sure what you mean," she

signed, then stopped. "Isn't she fae? I thought she was fae..."

"Well, she's a hobkin, I guess. Does that mean she has no heart?" Simon was no expert on fey physiology, much less fey metaphysiology. "If the vessel has to be a human or changeling, then never mind." That'd be a little disappointing, but not too much of a surprise.

Mizuko looked confused. She signed, "A physical heart? All you want is a physical heart? Then yes I'm sure she does. I thought you said something about pure hearts." She shook her head in bafflement. "I thought you liked her, though."

Simon held back a sigh. Mizuko's aquatic nature obviously included aspects of a clam, at least where giving information was concerned. Of course, imagining Mizuko as an oyster made Simon smile. It was hard to stay mad at her. "I do like her. I'd like to set her free because it's wrong to keep someone as a slave. Even if she leaves the moment the chains come off, that's what I want.

"I thought her heart might be pure because while she's not particularly altruistic, she also doesn't harbor guilt or malice or a lot of hangups. I also thought the bloodwort seed wouldn't cause any problems until death, and that's a long time from now.

"If any of that is wrong, then we'll have to think of something else, and Auriel will have to be my slave for now. I just figured you would know more than I do."

"Simon," Mizuko signed, "Lack of a heart doesn't imply purity of heart. If that were the case, then the True Fae would be pure as the driven snow." Mizuko signed in an agitated flurry that made it harder to understand her. She looked worried. "But I'm still not understanding you. Did you say the bloodwort seed wouldn't cause problems until she died? Why do you think death would be a long way off if the seed was eaten? Where you given some assurances about this? Then if she ate the seed, do you really know how long would she have to live before she died?"

"I don't *know*," Simon admitted. "Whoever we give the seed to could die the next day. I just meant the seed wouldn't hasten her death. We made sure of that much before we accepted the deal. So, back to square one on that, I guess."

"*Dammit*," Mizuko *said*. "I should have been there. You guys got stuck with a bum deal, didn't you? You needed me there and I wasn't there. I know, sick, and all that. That might be good enough to satisfy the motley pledge, but it isn't good enough for me. There should have been a way to make it work and instead you had to make a deal with fae without the one person in the motley whose supposed to know what's a good deal and what isn't." She looked distressed as she continued to sign. "I'm sorry, Simon. I'm really sorry.

"Look, let me have the seed. I'll take it. If it kills me, or something happens due to a twist of fate around this thing and I die, then it's okay because I would have died anyway."

"We have a moon to figure out a better option," Simon said. "Nobody has to take the seed now, but I don't think the deal is that bad. We have to give someone the seed. That person has to swallow it. Taking the seed won't hasten the person's death or do anything else until they die naturally. When they die I'm pretty sure they'll end up in the Hedge whether we take the body there or not. I specifically dangled that clause in the negotiation, and the bloodwort tree ignored it, and I know it wants the seed to sprout. In the Hedge, the seed will sprout, consume the person's body, and grow into... something. If the person has a pure heart, it'll be a new bloodwort tree. If not, it'll be something bad, and since the tree wouldn't specify, probably something really bad.

"Good or bad, we're not doing anything now. You nearly died. Less, Rey, and I nearly got eaten by demoncats. I bought another slave, which is getting to be a totally bad habit. If I'm guessing right, Rover nearly got laid. None of us are in a good place to be making life-changing decisions."

"Okay," Mizuko signed.

Not totally convinced, Simon made a mental note to find the seed and put it somewhere safe. "Good," he said. "Now I've got another question for you. Will you let me into your dreams?"

"Why?"

"I worry about you. You've been through more changes than the rest of us, and not because you wanted to. Today, when you were shot, I could tell you were slipping away. Sometimes I feel the same.

"I can't help you fight assassins or whatever. But I can look after your dreams. I don't want you to leave us, especially not that way."

She socked him in the arm hard enough to sting but not bruise. She squinted at him. "You're doing that chivalry thing again," Mizuko said. She shook her head, then continued to sign. "Modern girls call that chauvinist. I don't need a knight in shining armor. Say what you mean. I'm not going to break."

"First, ouch." Simon rubbed his arm. "Second, that chivalry thing is an integral part of my rougeish charm. I'd be insufferable without it. And third, I did say what I mean. You want the version I'd use on Rover? Fine.

"You got shot this morning and instead of going to a doctor or calling a healer, you wandered all over Rey's house bleeding on things. Maybe some good will come of it if you inspire her to buy new rugs and furniture, but you could have *died* for absolutely *no reason*."

"You're losing your grip on the mortal world, and I want to help you get it back. While I'm helping you, I hope to help myself. I can feel myself slipping, too. It's little stuff, but I can still tell something is wrong.

"Okay?"

"Not okay," Mizuko signed. "I don't see how letting you run around in my head is going to help me. That's way more personal than we've been," She sighed. She understood what he was saying, but couldn't help feeling defensive about it. "If it makes you feel better, I'll talk to Veridia about it."

If anyone knew about insanity, it would be Veridia Fear. Simon said, "Promise me, then. Tomorrow, if you can. This is really serious."

"Fine," Mizuko signed. "You really think I'm crazy?"

This was why Simon had tried the soft approach. "I think you're in danger of losing your grip on your mortal side, and you could use some help until you find yourself again. I don't think you're weak or defective. You're human, and humans have limits. And life mostly doesn't care what those limits are, especially for us."

She nodded. "Okay. I'll see what Veridia has to say about it."

When Simon and Mizuko returned from their chat, Rey spoke. "I didn't want to interrupt the introductions to Queen Cassandra," she said with a slight smile, "but in the future, it would be best to introduce me as 'Lady Rey', as benefits my title and association."

Simon acknowledged that and went off to find Auriel. He wanted to thank her for her help today.

Mizuko watched Simon go, then turned back to Rey. She looked curious. She signed, "Lady Rey? What is your association?" She studied Rey, really looking at her for the first time tonight. "You do look a little different."

"I have become a Lord Sage of the Unknown Reaches," Rey explained. "Lord Joshua, who you introduced to me the night I was presented to the Autumn Court, offered me membership. Full membership, no apprenticeship required." She gestured at the symbol that was woven into her mien and was currently located on her shoulder. "The change in my eyes, and the presence of symbols such as these, show I'm a part of the Lord Sages."

"What's it about?" Mizuko signed.

"Our purpose is to seek out and learn about other supernatural beings, like spirits and werewolves. We hope to use what we learn to gain allies or discover threats to changelings posed by these beings," Rey explained.

"I can see where that could be helpful," Mizuko signed. "So, why were you able to skip apprenticeship?"

"According to Lord Joshua, it was because I very aptly demonstrated my knowledge when I offered that piece of knowledge to Veridia," Rey replied. "Plus he'd learned of my knowledge of werewolves."

Mizuko hesitated. "They're real? Not just legends?"

Rey nodded. "They're as real as you and I. They tend to keep to themselves though. Personally, I don't think most of them are a threat. Not unless you piss them off, and then there could be trouble."

"This sounds like an interesting story." Mizuko sat down by the fire next to Rover. "Please, you must tell us how you discovered them."

"More like they discovered me," Rey said with a soft chuckle. "I found myself in a small town in the midst of territory claimed by a friendly pack. I became close to them." Some far closer than others, she thought, with a pang of loss. "I had to leave them behind when I came to Mythic. I couldn't stay there when I managed to escape from my Keeper. My Fetch was there, living my life." Rey's eyes took on a cold, slightly distant cast. "Someday soon, I'm going to go back there and deal with that thing once and for all."

"A whole pack of werewolves," Mizuko signed. "I bet you have a lot of stories." She caught the cold look, though, and eased off Rey. "Maybe sometime you can tell us the best ones."

"Perhaps," Rey said. "I'm not sure if stories about running around in the forest will be all that interesting to you, though." Her smile returned and she laughed. "There was a lot of running."

"Running around in a forest — with werewolves, you mean," Mizuko signed with a little smile of her own.

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Simon found Aurelia on the other side of the Hollow. He plopped down beside her and said "Hi, Aurelia. You did good today. I appreciate it. Rover told me how you took on Belle. Even if it wasn't necessary, it was brave."

"This is my home," she said simply.

"Okay," Simon said. "Since we're fixing the place up, is there anything you'd like. I'm still working on the whole 'not being a slave' thing, but I think at the very least you deserve your own room."

"I prefer not to live in that huge, dangerous-looking thing you are building. I like it out here," Auriel stated. She flitted down toward the spring, chain snaking along the ground behind her.