

Thursday, February 23rd, 2012

Mizuko had called Rey at work at three in the afternoon to let her know that her study of the Hook was completed. They'd decided to meet at Mizuko's apartment. For Rey, work ended at five so she arrived at 5:30. When Mizuko opened the door to greet her friend, the Fairest was carrying a large canvas shopping bag.

She welcomed her friend inside, led her to the table upon which the Hook rested, covered in a dish cloth. Mizuko had already poured some iced tea.

"These are for you," Rey said, taking out three boxes from her bag, "in thanks for the work you've done on the Hook." Two of them were the kind you'd get at clothing stores, the other was about an inch thick, covered in velvet and about the size of a sheet of paper.

Mizuko signed, "Before you present any kind of payment, I think you should hear what I found out. This thing was hard to decipher and it is unpleasant. I think there could be long-term consequences to using it, but I was unable to predict what that might be."

"*Less? Will you join us please.*" Less had been invited by Mizuko with a mysterious-sounding call that implied she had crucial information to impart regarding the Keeper they defeated last weekend. The hard-to-notice King of Winter had been silently relaxing in one of the overstuffed chairs in the living room.

Less pushed himself up with his umbrella and glided into the kitchen. He gave a friendly nod to Rey.

The nymph sorceress removed the cloth to reveal the thing. "You see, as near as I can tell, this exists, yet it isn't simply physical. It's more like a powerful metaphysical statement projected into this world. Like an idea or a word or... a title. In that way, it's utterly unlike any mere token, relic or artifact I have ever examined, although it behaves in ways similar to Tokens.

"When we defeated the Keeper, we didn't merely destroy his body. We stripped him of something." She tapped the evilly gleaming Hook. "For the moment, it doesn't truly belong to him anymore. That means so long as we have control of this, the Hook cannot rise again. Not in that guise, anyway." Mizuko sighed. "I know this all sounds very strange, but I sacrificed a lot to get this information. I think it's true but it may be misleading, so take the facts I give you to heart, not their implications."

Mizuko took a breath, then continued to sign in Glymjack. "Okay. So what does it actually do. Well, when activated with magic it has the power to convert pain and suffering into healing power, magical power, and mental strength. It's a siphon for pure power in every sense of the word and it will fill the user in any way he desires. Or she. There is a drawback to this, of course. It literally replaces your hand. You can take it off to get your hand back, but it will be paralyzed, unfeeling like you don't even have a hand for half a day afterwards. Finally, anyone can use this, even non-changelings if they invoke the Catch. That is, you cut your hand off and permanently affix the Hook.

"Like I said, though. There could be long term consequences."

"Do you know how to destroy it?" Rey asked after a moment's thought.

Mizuko shrugged. "How do you destroy an idea?"

Rey laughed, a short, harsh sound. "Right. I'll make sure this is somewhere secure until I decide what I'm going to do with it." She turned and retrieved the boxes she brought with her and offered them to Mizuko. "I still want you to have these. Actually, these two are for your help." She indicated the velvet-covered box and the larger of the two cardboard boxes. "This one is your repaired green dress."

Mizuko's eyes lit up. She accepted the boxes and took a peek inside first box to look at the amazing dress

Rey had made her and that had been damaged at 12th Night. Her face showed her delight when she saw it looked as if it had never been damaged at all. She lifted it part way out of the box so she could appreciate the work Rey put into it.

She showed it to Less. "Have you seen this one? I think I wore it to court once."

"Yes, the seaweed. Very memorable."

Next she removed the lid to the other box and took a look inside. Nestled in sheets of tissue paper was elegant strapless gown woven from fae driftwood and the foam of a stormy sea. Mizuko carefully removed it and took a look. The dress seemed to rain occasional sparks of magic in a soothing, rhythmic pattern. Mizuko was entranced. "This is amazing," she breathed.

Rey smiled, pleased Mizuko liked the dress. "The other box has stuff to go with it."

The nymph carefully returned the dress and opened the last box. It was smaller than the rest and something inside rustled when she picked it up. Inside the box, almost floating on a bed of black velvet, was a matching set of jewelry of silver and stones that seemed to have the sea moving in them. Rey had fashioned the largest into the pendant of the necklace, and strung it with beads and chains of silver. Other stones she smoothed and carved into beads and tiny pendants, some of which she also threaded onto silver chains and loops of silver wire to create bracelets. The last of the beads, some not much larger than a grain of rice, were crafted into a set of earrings. The earrings were a web of extremely fine chains studded with the tiny beads, and had little clips that allowed the Mizuko to attach them along the outer edge of her ears, all the way to their tips.

Mizuko gasped, then examined each piece with a fascinated intensity. She put it down so Less could see, too.

"This is really amazing work. You made this?" she signed to Rey, who nodded. Mizuko wore a big smile as she gathered up the boxes. "I love these," she told Rey. "And if there might be a fight next time I wear something you made, I'm taking it off first."

Rey couldn't help but laugh. "I'm sure your stripping with either stop the fight, or create a whole new one." She smiled. "Do you consider these items to be an acceptable payment for analyzing the Hook?" The Fairest knew Mizuko said she wouldn't haggle, but the value of things such as the application of knowledge and art were so very subjective. The important part was whether or not Mizuko considered the payment appropriate. If not, Rey would find something to add to it.

The excited look on Mizuko's face was mirrored in her signed response. "Yes. Of course. You did amazing work! I will treasure these. I only hope that what you have learned about the Hook will help you decide how to deal with it."

"It seems this appendage might be what creates the monstrous Keeper we fought," said Less. "Keep it safe and secret, and if you start having strange dreams about it, please tell us right away."

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Friday, February 24th, 2012

Rey finished up the last of the day's paperwork, and as she waited for the report to print out, she dialed up Mizuko's number.

Mizuko looked up at the salesman's face over the counter. She signed something the young man in a formal shirt and slacks didn't understand, but luckily her remark wasn't really meant for him anyway.

"Actually, 'Zuko," Amber told her, "I think it's a call."

Mizuko eyed the new phone suspiciously while it again emitted loud, overly-flamboyant tones and vibrated itself closer to the edge of the counter. She sighed, "But I just traded in my broken one for this. How could it be ringing? I haven't told anyone my number."

Amber tried to be patient. "The nice man put your old SIM card into ..." Seeing the blank look on Mizuko's she realized it was a lost cause to try to explain. "Look, he just transferred your number into the phone."

Mizuko eyed the man again. "He can do that? To any phone here?" She frowned at what the possibilities might mean. Could anyone just get a copy of her number and listen to her conversations.

Amber said, "Yes. Now answer your call or you're going to miss them. I'll pay the nice man."

Mizuko picked up her new ultra-thin flip phone and, still not entirely certain this was all on the up and up, turned away.

"Um," said the man, "if she can't speak, then how will --"

Amber headed off his line of questioning with cash while Mizuko answered. "Hello?" she asked in a whispery, suspicious tone.

"Hi, Mizuko," Rey said. "I'm not calling at a bad time, am I?"

"*I got a new phone,*" Mizuko stated, as if that was an answer. "*I can't tell if this is a bad time for you or not. We have to be in person for that to work.*"

"No, is it a bad time for you? As in am I interrupting something you're doing."

"*No. I'm at the mall. Everyone talks on phones here.*"

Rey stifled a laugh. If she was talking to anyone but Mizuko, she'd have wondered what the person was smoking. "I was wondering if you'd like to grab dinner with me tonight? My treat."

"*What place do you have in mind?*"

"The Pipe and Fiddle."

"*I think I would like that, but Drake is taking me there tomorrow night. Do you have a second choice?*"

"I hadn't really thought about it. Is there somewhere you'd like to go?"

"*We could eat with Ollie at the holl-- home.*"

She wants to have dinner with her pet, Rey thought. Not my idea of fun. "I want to go somewhere where we can be waited on, where neither of us have to gather or cook, and where we can ogle the cute servers." She opened a drawer and pulled out a couple of flyers. "There's a new Chinese place that opened up on Marlborough. How about giving that a try?"

"Okay. What time?"

"How does 6:30 sound? That'll give me time to get home and change. Did you want me to pick you up, or can you get there on your own?"

Mizuko thought about the cash she and Amber just shelled out for this phone. The phone was water resistant, and pretty resistant to impacts, too. It was also expensive and after paying for it, taking cabs around town would be a hardship. That left the bus as her only remaining option, but it wasn't terrible. *"I can get there if you can give me the address."*

Rey gave her the information. "I'll see you there."

Mizuko closed the connection and blinked at the phone, remembering she needed to update someone. She wasn't exactly sure why she'd agreed to update a tourism company on her private movements and decided that this was absolutely the last time she'd bother with it. She fired off a text that said, "chinese place on marlborough, 6:30" to the number she'd been given by the polite Mr. Klein.

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The sun had set a little while ago, and Mizuko was upset. She hurried from the bus stop after a frustrating ride in circles around where she needed to go. Missing the fact that a blue sedan was slowly following her down the street, she swiftly strode directly to the restaurant. She stopped near the entrance where the sign read, "Please wait to be seated" and looked around.

The restaurant was swathed in red-stained woodwork with see-through partitions that divided rows of private booths. The middle had more open seating around tables, and plants occupied large planters near the entrance as well as near the kitchen doors. It took her moment to spot Rey, but when she did she breezed past the hostess on her way to the booth.

"You look frazzled," Rey signed to her. "You okay?"

Mizuko nodded and smiled, then slid into the cushioned seat across from her friend.

"Took the bus?" At Mizuko's nod, Rey continued. "I remember having to take the bus everywhere. It was a real pain." She flipped her menu open. "The menu looks pretty good. I'm going to order some tea to start with. Want to share a pot?"

Mizuko's smile showed her approval. She opened her own menu and stared at the foreign names, then concentrated more on the descriptions.

The waitress came by and took their order for tea.

When she was gone, Mizuko put aside the menu and signed to Rey. "No Richard tonight?"

Rey shook her head. "Just the two of us. Girls' night out. I left a message for him earlier, to see if he might want to get together tomorrow morning, but I haven't heard back yet."

The nymph nodded slightly, and looked around the room the restaurant from her place in the booth. She wondered if this was the sort of place a tourism company might be interested in promoting.

"What do you think of the place?" Rey asked her friend.

"It's nice," Mizuko signed. "We've never started an evening together that didn't end up with us going home with different people. Do you think that is strange?"

Rey couldn't help but laugh. "Given who we are, not really. Maybe tonight will be different." The waitress returned, setting a teapot and two small cups and saucers on the table, after which she asked if the two women were ready to order.

Mizuko nodded and signed her order to Rey. She just wanted fried rice to go with the hot tea.

Rey passed the message along to the waitress, and ordered a Szechuan chicken with pasta dish and an order of potstickers. "They're one of my favorites," she told her friend about the dumplings. "Especially the dipping sauce."

Mizuko prompted conversation by asking Rey about her work as well as her personal ambitions with the pub. After tea was brought to them but before their dinner was served, Mizuko excused herself to use the restroom.

The elemental nymph picked her way past tables and then paused at one occupied by a man and young woman. He had short, brown hair and blue-green eyes. His date's back was to Mizuko but she was blonde and a little on the petite side, much like herself. Mizuko recognized him and was a little surprised to see him.

She paused as she passed to grant him a nod in recognition. He caught her arm on the way by to stop her.

"I couldn't help but come to see this place for myself. I hope you don't mind?" His voice was more sonorous than she remembered. But then a club isn't the best place to hear someone speak.

Mizuko blinked at him, then shook her head. She didn't care that he was here, but it felt a little odd.

"Enjoy your dinner." He smiled cheerfully.

She gave him a curt nod, then looked at his date and nodded at her as well. Mizuko realized at that point she was staring at her. Was it jealousy? There was a trace of envy and resentment on her face. Mizuko frowned a little and then continued on her way to the ladies' room.

Mizuko returned to the booth a few minutes later. She was just in time since the waitress returned with their meals and laid it all down in front of them.

"Who was that?" Rey asked in sign. She'd seen the interaction between Mizuko and the unknown man and was curious.

"His name is Xavier," Mizuko signed. "He works for a tourism company."

"Where'd you meet him before?" People in the tourist industry generally weren't the kind of people Rey expected Mizuko to associate with.

"At Glasshouse," Mizuko replied. She picked up the chopsticks and tasted the rice with practiced ease.

"Small world," Rey said with a small shrug and began to eat her lunch. She couldn't help but glance over at Xavier and his date from time to time, wondering at the coincidence, though she eventually set it aside. It was likely just coincidence. This was a new restaurant, after all.

Rey and Mizuko were done with their meal and discussing what they might like to do next when they realized the man Mizuko called Xavier arrived at their booth. The blonde woman with him was an interesting complement to him. He was tall and dark-haired with sharp, grey eyes and a strong jaw. She was small, around Mizuko's size and blonde. They were both attractive and she managed to conform comfortably to his posture without actually touching him. She wasn't looking at anything in particular, giving

one the impression her every sense was focused and waiting on his word.

Xavier wore a dark blue suit coat and slacks, with a white shirt beneath. The woman wore a sexy black dress that clung to her form. The man smiled at both changelings.

He addressed Mizuko. "I couldn't help but notice your friend looking our way several times through dinner, so I thought I might allay her curiosity with a friendly introduction. Is that all right?"

Mizuko looked at him and nodded. He turned his attention to Rey and said, "My name is Xavier and this is Ellie." He extended his hand to her.

"Rey," the fairest replied hesitating for a moment before taking his hand and shaking it. She didn't normally shake hands with someone for the first time she met in a purely social situation, but Rey didn't want to be rude.

"Pleased to meet you. I'm afraid I didn't get your friend's name when we first met the other night. Something of a language barrier." He smiled at his jest. He let her hand go and then asked, "I'm a little embarrassed we shared a drink and such a nice, if one-sided, conversation and I never knew her name. Would you mind introducing her to me?"

"Do you want him to know your name?" Rey quickly signed in Glymjack Cant, "or should I make something up so we can have some fun?" She grinned at her friend.

Mizuko shrugged. "He was nice to me," she signed. "I don't mind if he knows my name."

Rey looked at Xavier and Ellie. "Her name's Mizuko."

Xavier focused entirely on Rey. "How do the two of you know each other? How did you meet?"

"We met at the Iron Mountain train station. She was being chased by some guys, and I went to help her. We've been friends ever since." Rey glanced at Mizuko. "Sure, I get angry with her, but it's forgive and move on, right? It's what friends do."

Mizuko looked down at her hands. Xavier noticed but didn't comment.

"I'm glad you both are good friends. Putting yourself at risk for someone you didn't know at the time speaks volumes about your character."

He paused just long enough to insert a change of topic. "You both look like wonderful people. Would the two of you come over to my place to continue our conversation?" He touched Mizuko's shoulder, which cause her to raise her face to his. "I would really like it if you did."

She nodded and slid out of the booth. She signed, "I think we have an answer as to what to do tonight."

"Sure," Rey replied gathering up her purse and jacket. "But just for a little while. I've got to be up early tomorrow."

"Perfect," Xavier said charmingly. He even paid for their meal, leaving a couple twenties on the table for the waitress. The staff thanked them as they left. They stepped outside while Xavier pressed a button on his phone.

"Paging the driver," he explained. "I have a car waiting. It's no limo, but it's comfortable and roomy. Would the two of you like a ride? My driver can drop you off anywhere you wish later."

"Yes please," Mizuko signed immediately and with some relief on her face.

Xavier didn't know sign language but the gesture and her posture was simple to interpret. He smiled and looked at Rey.

"I'll follow in my car, if you don't mind."

He nodded. "Of course not."

A black Charger with tinted windows pulled up. Ellie let herself in the front passenger side while Xavier opened the back door for Mizuko. He then went around to the other side and joined her in the back seat. Rey realized with a start they were going to leave without her if she didn't scramble, but by the time she got to her car, they were gone.

With a hiss of exasperation, Rey whipped out her phone and dialed Mizuko's phone number.

Mizuko, settled in the cushy seats of Xavier's plush new car, dug her phone out. She'd worn a full-length dress tonight. It was long sleeved but had a wide V top. She hadn't brought a coat (her's was ugly and she'd managed to destroy Amber's favorite ones), so she'd had to simply be cold. No coat meant no pockets, so she was keeping a small amount of cash for the bus in her purse along with her phone. She removed the new phone now as it rang insistently.

Xavier watched curiously as she opened it. She didn't say anything for a long moment as she looked at Xavier then Ellie, who was also looking back at her over the seat, and finally the driver.

"Mizuko?"

"Yes, Rey. I'm here." Her entrancing voice held a musical quality reminiscent of singing over the soft hush of waves upon a rocky isle. Xavier watched her closely.

"You guys left without me." Rey's disappointment was heavy in her voice.

"*We did?*" Mizuko looked up at Xavier. Her face flushed, knowing that her feigned lack of speech ruse was up. Now it felt like she'd been lying to his face. "*Xavier, where are we going? The driver didn't wait for Rey to get to her car and follow.*"

Rey could here Xavier's voice over the phone. "My apologies. I allowed myself to be distracted." He let his eyes run meaningfully over Mizuko. She avoided his gaze. She'd noticed that Ellie was giving her a venomously jealous look. He named an address.

"*Did you hear?*" Mizuko asked.

"I did," Rey replied with relief. "I'll meet you there as soon as I can."

"Okay." Mizuko closed the phone and put it back in her purse.

"Your voice," Xavier said, "it's very... beautiful. Some might say unnaturally so." He turned in the seat to face her more fully. Mizuko suddenly had a bad feeling about this. She tried to look away but when she did, his put his hand on her shoulder and she snapped her head back around to stare at him. "Tell me who — or what — you really are."

"*I was human, but now fae. Some might call me a nymph or elemental.*" Mizuko didn't know why she said that. It seemed like the right thing at the moment she said it but she realized it was a mistake. Her eyes widened and confusion set in. She didn't know why she was telling him this.

Xavier looked at her with some surprise. A cold, calculating look entered his eyes and Mizuko seriously began to consider how to make a quick escape from this car. She couldn't seem to stop herself from blabbing her most important secrets. Maybe she'd gone mad and hadn't noticed. Does a person notice things like that, she wondered.

"Mizuko," he said. She was staring at her hands. "Mizuko, it's all right," he said soothingly. He lifted her chin and angled her face toward him. "You are safe. Now, I want you to tell me all about who you are and what it means to be a nymph... or elemental."

And she immediately began to tell him. She had no idea why she was crying as she did.

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Rey found a condominium at the location she was told and was able to determine the number from the directory. There wasn't a name associated with it, but when she rang the buzzer the outside doors unlocked and she could take the elevator up.

When Rey arrived at the appointed condo, she was let in by a woman dressed in a business suit. She had short brown hair and dark eyes. She was handsome dressed this way, but Rey wouldn't call her pretty. She said, "Hello, Rey. I'm Becka. We've been expecting you. Please come in."

After Rey stepped inside, Becka closed the door. It made a beep when it latched.

The entryway opened immediately into the living room. The place was bare, undecorated, containing only a large flat-screen TV on the wall, a couch, and a metal chair. "You know, Xavier was a little offended you didn't take him up on his offer to drive you. He would have taken care of you personally. You probably would have even had a pleasant evening and gone home nice and safe by morning. That's all right though. We are nothing if not adaptable."

"The lot where I parked my car tows after midnight. I didn't want to leave it there," Rey replied absently as she looked around, concern warring with the disappointment of not finding Mizuko and Xavier. "What's going on?"

"Xavier wanted some words alone with her. We'd like it if you would stay here while he does that." The brunette watched Rey's reaction.

"Why? I mean, if he wanted to talk to her alone, why did he invite me along to begin with?"

"Insurance," Becka said. "Xavier's idea was that if she could see you then she might be more willing to listen. If you ask me, I think it's overkill. I think he overestimates your friend." Becka shrugged.

"Here's the deal. If you both cooperate, nobody gets hurt and we all go home tomorrow or maybe the next day. But if you misbehave," she pointed out a camera in the upper corner of the room, "she gets hurt. Likewise, if she proves stubborn, you get hurt. It's really up to the two of you."

Becka took a remote out of her pocket and aimed it at the TV. It blinked to life. There wasn't any sound, but Rey could see an image of Mizuko standing in an expensively furnished apartment. Ellie was there, easily recognizable. There was a man dressed like Xavier, but the few times he glanced at the camera, his face was completely blurred.

"She can see me, right now, then?" Rey glanced around, looking for the camera.

Becka shrugged. "If she looks at their TV. Why?"

"How can I tell this feed is live? Does she really know I'm here?" Rey put a bit of disbelief in her voice, hoping she'd given enough of a prompt to Becka to get Mizuko to look at the tv. When she did, Rey was ready to sign as fast as she could. Xavier and his two lackeys wouldn't get away with this. No way, no how.

"The TV over there is on that wall, just out of sight of the camera. If she's uncooperative, she'll look that way to see what happens to you." Becka couldn't keep the slight gloat out of her voice.

Rey watched Mizuko turn to walk away, but then stop and look toward where Becka said the tv was. This was her chance. Rey's fingers immediately went into motion. "X is vampire. Kill him. They can't hold me. Do it!" As she signed, she started to gather her power, ready to use it in whatever way she'd need to to get away - and make them pay.

Rey watched in satisfaction as Mizuko spun into action. Her reaction to Rey's message was instant — she burst into flame and followed by turning to a burning nymph of ice and anger. Rey saw Xavier back away and Mizuko pick up a couch.

Then there was a loud bang and Rey saw Mizuko staring at something just out of sight, on the wall. Her advance was frozen.

Then Rey's leg gave out from under her and she was taken by terrible pain. She grit her teeth and continued to gather Glamour as she turned her head to look at Becka, a low, menacing growl rumbling her in chest.

"Don't worry," Becka told her. "I won't shoot you again, unless your friend continues to resist." She checked the monitor. The couch was had fallen out of Mizuko's numb hands where it lay smoldering. Ellie attacked it with a fire extinguisher. Mizuko was still staring at the monitor, her intended attack forgotten. Even in the black and white grainy image on the TV, Rey could see how upset Mizuko was. She figured Mizuko must be looking at her.

Something flopped to the floor next where Rey lay. "Surgical tubing," Becka told her. "It's really useful in making a tourniquet. You could use it to strangle me, too, I suppose. Or maybe if you are like your friend and have... powers, you'll fry me. Unfortunately for you, that will only get your friend hurt. Anyway, you have some choices to make. You can use that tubing to help stop that bleeding, or you can attack me and probably pass out from blood loss anyway. Plus you get your friend hurt as well."

Rey picked up the tubing and tied it around her leg as best she could. "I need to go to the bathroom."

"Bathroom's over there," Becka said waving vaguely to a hall off the room they were in. "You're welcome to it." She kept well out of reach.

Rey dragged herself along the floor toward the bathroom, wincing each time her leg was jostled. All she needed was some privacy, and a bit of noise to cover what she was doing. She looked back at the tv screen and gave a little shake of her head, hoping Mizuko would understand.

When she finally got to the bathroom, she spotted a camera in there as well. "Man, your master's a real perv. Does he get his jollies watching women take a piss?" Reaching the vanity, she pulled herself up to her feet. "I hope you've got your resume ready, Becka. I saw how X-fucked looked at my friend. He's going to kick you and Ellie to the curb. You saw it yourself, she could do some pretty cool stuff. Why the hell would he want you when he can have that?"

She didn't hear Becka respond, but then, when she looked around, she didn't see Becka either. She must still be in the other room, just out of sight. Rey smiled, then pulled the bathroom door closed and locked it. Carefully she half shuffled, half hopped back to the vanity and put her purse on the vanity. She poked around in it, and pressed the the button to activate the screen of her phone, then quickly pressed the panic

button that dialled 911 before pulling out a small bottle of ibuprofen.

A female voice crackled over a weak connection on the phone. "Emergency Services, what is the nature of your emergency?"

Rey turned her back to the camera as she very slowly made her way to the toilet. "This is Rey Lafitte," Rey said quickly, and said the address. "I have been kidnapped and have been shot in the leg by my kidnappers. I don't know how long I have before they figure out I managed to call for help. There's at least one woman here and she's armed."

The voice on the phone said, "I see, ma'am. It appears you are using a cell phone. Are you able to provide an address?" There was another pause.

Rey repeated the address as quickly as she could.

"I'm directing officers to your location now, ma'am. Please remain calm. Should for any reason our connection fail, try to cooperate with your abductors so as to sustain as little injury as possible. Help is on the way."

Static had intruded on the last part of what she told Rey, and then her connection died.

Rey turned her back to the toilet and with a struggled, pulled her underwear down and sat. She didn't really need to go, but wanted to maintain the illusion. She opened the pill bottle and realized it was empty - she'd forgotten to refill it. Of course, Rey realized that she might not have actually reached the police - Xavier's people might have found a way to intercept the transmission. She hoped that wasn't the case, for that meant her decision not to co-operate by calling for help would have been for nothing.

After a few moments, Rey completed the toilet ritual and struggled to her feet. She put the empty pill bottle back in her purse, taking the opportunity to turn her phone off and hoped the 911 call wouldn't have been recorded in the call log. The fairest resisted the temptation to give the camera - and the person watching the feed - the finger, and struggled out of the bathroom and back to the living room.

When she got back in, Becka told her to have a seat in the chair if she liked.

"May I sit on the couch instead?" Rey asked.

Becka nodded. "Sure, make yourself comfortable."

Up on the TV, she saw Mizuko, back in her normal form again, looking utterly hopeless. She sat there on the couch looking at her hands. When Xavier took Mizuko's face in his hands, Rey had a hard time not lashing out. "What is he doing to her?" she asked.

"Helping her recover her memories, I would guess," Becka said. "Helping her remember who she is and why she's here."

Becka didn't seem inclined to answer any further questions. For the next hour, Rey watched as Mizuko sat on the couch stock still while she listened to the vampire. She nodded from time to time and answered a couple things, but that lost look never left her face. It was obvious her call to 911 was intercepted, and the fairest couldn't take it any more. She glanced over at her captor and spent the tiniest amount of power to rifle through the woman's mind, seeking out what it was the woman was most afraid of.

Vampires. Why was Rey not surprised. The woman wasn't afraid of Xavier - who had likely mind-raped her - but she was afraid of other ones. Probably knows what they're capable of. But Rey could use that to her advantage. Another use of power and the fairest activated her most recently required Contract. "You know,

Becka," Rey said in a falsely casual tone. "You made a big mistake when you hurt me, let alone taking part in my kidnapping."

"It's nothing personal," Becka assured her. "In fact, I like your spirit. And your loyalty to your friend. I think most people would have decided that it was everyone for themselves by now. You're doing good. Keep it up and you might get out of this alive yet."

"My sponsor, Alexander Kresakin, won't be pleased. In fact, he'll likely take it as a personal insult what happened to me."

Becka blinked. "Who?" A frown tugged her lips downward. "You mean a..."

"Of course, a vampire. Who else could sponsor me and matter?" Rey turned to face Becka more. "I admire your loyalty too, but it's not going to matter much when Alexander mentions this to the Don."

Becka paled. "Shit." She pulled out a cell phone of her own and made a call. "Sir? She's claiming she belongs to Alexander Kresakin. Yes, Kresakin. But sir, she mentioned he might take this to the Don." She paused a long while, swallowed hard, then said, "Yes, sir," and signed off.

Becka looked upset, pressed her lips together, and controlled her breathing. "Okay, just listen. Ray doesn't believe it. He doesn't know that much, but yet I can't talk to Master Xavier just now. But, we don't have to do this anymore. It's pretty much over."

She reached inside her jacket and removed a slender case. She tossed it onto the couch near Rey. "That's a sedative. Just inject it into that vein in your elbow. It will put you to sleep for a little while to give me time to leave. Then you can go home. I can even call an ambulance for you if you like."

"How do I know Xavier didn't give this to you in order to kill me and and lied to you about the contents?" Rey gave Becka a smile. "Come on. What am I going to do? Chase you down and follow you? I promise I'll give you fifteen minutes and then I'll leave. And I'll tell Alexander how you helped me."

Becka stared at Rey, as if trying to figure out a puzzle. Then she nodded. "Appreciate that. People like you and I, we don't have any choice in things like that. There isn't any need for unpleasantness. The needle there really does have a sedative. No lie. Keep it. You might want it anyway if the leg hurts too bad."

Becka moved around the room in the direction of the door, but kept distance between herself and Rey. She glanced at the TV one more time and shuddered. She stopped at the door with her back to Rey. "Hey uh, listen. You want my advice? Your friend is gone. If I were you, I'd go home, find a bottle of brandy, and do my damndest to forget her. Because she definitely doesn't know you anymore."

Becka opened the door quickly, stepped outside and hurried away.

On the TV, Rey watched as Xavier continued to talk to Mizuko.

Rey waited exactly 15 minutes, then got up off the couch and half-hopped toward the door and freedom.

Once she was in her car and locked the doors, Rey dialed Richard's number, praying that he would answer.

When Mizuko had arrived with Xavier at what looked like a ten-story office building in a suburb of Mythic City, she'd finished telling him of her fae nature and Arcadian powers. She hadn't wanted to, but it seemed like the right thing to do at the time. He'd given her his handkerchief to clean up her face before they'd gone

in.

Their destination was the top floor penthouse suite. It was big, comfortable, and had a fine view of the mountains. Xavier offered her a glass of wine, which she took — after all that talking she was parched. She stared at her drink, confused and wondering why she just spilled her guts to a stranger.

She also didn't know why there was a big guy at the door. He was dressed in a suit but she was sure she'd seen the butt of a pistol beneath his black jacket. He looked like a guard but was told he was a friend.

Ellie was set up at a computer desk which was faced away from her.

"My dear, I'm so glad you are here. We can get straight to business."

Mizuko looked at him sharply.

"Oh yes. We have a great deal to talk about. There are many things about which you have been greatly mistaken and terribly misled."

This was too much. She had to get away from this man. It seemed like she couldn't help but agree with whatever he said and that was too dangerous. She'd already told him far too much. Without a word, she turned on her heel and headed for the door, planning to go straight through the man in the suit standing in the way.

"Before you go, I think you need to see this."

She glanced with a big screen TV flickered to life and stopped when she recognized Rey. Her friend seemed to be looking out at her. Suddenly, she signed, "X is vampire. Kill him. They can't hold me. Do it!"

Things happened very fast then. Blue-white flame seemed to burst from her skin as she turned to advance on Xavier. The vampire mind-bender's eyes widened as she advanced. He shrank against the far wall and watched in horror as Mizuko's body became ice. She swept up a couch as if it was a toy and was about to hurl it when Xavier shouted, "Wait! Attack me or continue any resistance and it will be worse for your friend."

Mizuko froze, staring at the monitor. Rey was on the floor of the bare apartment she was in. There was a ragged hole in her right leg and blood was rapidly spilling out onto the floor.

"No," Mizuko mouthed.

"Put out the fire Mizuko," Xavier said, his calm stretched ragged due to the presence of such heat and fire. "Return to your normal self and this can be civil again. There is no need to continue this unpleasantness."

It had taken Mizuko a great deal of power to sheath herself in flames and take on the body of ice as she had. She didn't think she had the strength to do it a second time. Mizuko hesitated.

"*You will let her go. Then I will consider cooperation,*" Mizuko demanded.

Xavier shook his head. "She is there to ensure your cooperation, I'm afraid."

"*If she is harmed again, I will destroy you, this entire building, and everyone in it. Be assured I am not possessed of mercy. Do it now.*"

Xavier held up his hands. "Only you have the power to determine whether she is harmed or not. If you cooperate, she will not be hurt. She will receive food, assistance. She will not be touched. And we will let

her go. But if you do not desist, if you do not return to your normal form... Well. I have no control over what my compatriot will do. She's been ordered to harm Rey if you appear to be uncooperative."

Mizuko looked pained, looking from the monitor to Xavier. Rey seemed to be talking to her captor. Mizuko couldn't stop looking at the horrible wound her friend had taken just to give her that one message.

Her friends were all dying around her. Mizuko couldn't shake that thought. First her friends last summer. Then last weekend a Keeper murdered Rose. And now a vampire was going to hurt, maybe kill Rey unless she cooperated with him.

"Swear it. Swear to me that if I cooperate with you, you will not harm her and that you will let her go."

"That is my intention already. We are professionals here. Your friend is ... collateral damage, which we would like to avoid if possible."

Mizuko looked up at the big monitor again. Rey had dragged herself to the bathroom and now the image changed from what seemed to be an upper corner of the bathroom. She watched as Rey dug through her purse.

"She's making a call, master," Ellie told Xavier from her position at the computer.

"Of course she is. Becka didn't take her phone away. Do you have the call?"

"I'm trying, sir." Ellie worked at the keyboard. "I'm... I'm not a hacker but they said this software would work at least once. Wait. I think I have it." She put on the headset and said in a professional voice, "Emergency Services, what is the nature of your emergency?" She waited a bit, then followed with, "I see, ma'am. It appears you are using a cell phone. Are you able to provide an address?" There was another pause. "I'm directing officers to your location now, ma'am. Please remain calm. Should for any reason our connection fail, try to cooperate with your abductors so as to sustain as little injury as possible. Help is on the way."

Mizuko's heart fell. Rey didn't know there wasn't any help coming. No one even knew they were missing, nor would they be missed for a couple days at least. Her stomach flipped when she remembered her date with Drake tomorrow night. She'd texted that bastard all about it.

Realizing her friend had fallen totally within the power of these people, Mizuko let her fire die away.

The man near the door approached her. "Stop," ordered Xavier. "Do not touch her just yet." He pointed at the couch. Where she had touched it had been seared, but also strangely there was evidence of frost and broken fabric where it had been so cold it shattered. "Return to your post, Ray."

While he did so, Mizuko allowed her body to return to its normal state. The crystal-blue form melted away, and the strange glow from her eyes faded. She sat on the couch, defeated and staring at her hands.

A moment later, Xavier sat down next to her and raised a hand to her face. She recoiled from his touch, but didn't struggle when he grabbed her chin and forced her to look at him. When he began to talk to her, her eyes locked on his, and her face went slack.

He had a lot to say.

"Rey! Hey thanks for returning my calls. I guess you've been busy." Richard's voice lost some of its usual basso note over the phone but Rey could hear it in her mind.

"Oh thank god I got a hold of you," Rey said in a rush, holding back a very undignified sob. "Mizuko and I were kidnapped by a vampire named Xavier over an hour ago. I just managed to escape, but I don't know where Mizuko is. They separated us."

There was a shocked moment. Then he asked, "Where are you?"

Rey gave the address. "I'm in my car but I don't know if I can drive. My leg's hurt. Bad."

"I'm on my way. What about Mizuko?" Rey could hear wind as Richard left wherever he was and headed speedily to his truck.

"I don't think she's hurt. Not physically at least." Rey couldn't hold back a growl of anger. "They grabbed me to force her to co-operate. When I told her not to worry about me and kill the bastard, the woman standing guard over me shot me. He's brainwashing her. He's going to destroy everything she was and make her into..." She couldn't finish the sentence. "I was forced to sit there and watch what he was doing, and she was forced to see what they'd done to me. She couldn't bring herself to keep fighting."

"Those motherless bastards. Every last one of them needs to burn," he rumbled. Rey heard a door shut as he jumped into his truck. A moment later it roared to life. "Rey, I'm twenty five minutes away from you. Will you be okay until I arrive?"

"I should," Rey said, "but if they find out I'm gone, I'll have to try and drive. I can't let them take me again."

"All right. I need both my hands to make it there in that time. Don't move. I'm coming."

When Rey finished her conversation with Richard, she dialed a phone number she never expected to have to. It went to voice mail, and she left a message in a falsely pleasant voice. "Remy, a buddy of yours named Xavier kidnapped Mizuko and myself. I managed to escape with a huge hole in my leg, but Xavier is destroying Mizuko's mind. You know what I told you would result if something like this happened. What are you going to do about it?"

Rey put the phone in the cup holder between the front seats and allowed herself a vicious smile. In one of their first conversations, she'd laid out in exquisite detail what would happen if either she or Mizuko were ever "tampered" with, and a potential war with the Autumn Court would be the least of his concerns.

Richard arrived as promised. He had a first aid kit in his truck, and they got to work on her leg right away. However, the bone had been shattered and he couldn't find an exit wound. They had little choice but to go to the hospital and he told her so.

"Then take me there," Rey said. The adrenaline that had been keeping her going had run out, and she was sorely tempted to use that sedative Becka had given her. "Before I forget, there's a thing in my purse with a syringe. The woman who shot me handled it, so if we're lucky, the police might be able to get her fingerprints off it. That is if I didn't foul them all up when I grabbed it on my way out."

"The police?" Richard muttered. "Damn. We'll have to file a report if we take you in with a gunshot wound. There will be a lot of questions. You okay with this?"

"I don't know anyone in Spring I could ask," Rey said. She wasn't about to contact Ishtar - she didn't want to owe her anything, not even a favor. The other problem was she didn't know many other Changelings in the Duchy outside of her Court, something she was yet again reminded she needed to change. "Unless you know someone you trust who I'd have a chance to make a good deal with. I could call Marie, but I don't know if she and her friends could help."

"If you don't want Spring's help and you don't think your sister can help, then we are left trying to find someone with some kind of goblin contract for healing," Richard mused.

"Witches and Changelings aren't the only people who can heal," Rey replied. "I've got a friend who might know someone who could help." Her head tilted slightly side to side as she weighed her options, then looked at Richard with a little smile. "I know my friend would like to meet you."

He was too worried to smile back. "For your sake and for Mizuko's sake, I hope they can."

Rey grabbed her phone and called Lyla.

It rang three times, then Lyla answered. "My. You are certainly calling late, Rey." Her voice was silken, smooth and carried the sweet allure of honey. "Are you lonely for me tonight?"

"Always," Rey replied immediately, though she bit back any further reply because Richard was with her. "I'm in a situation, and I need to find a healer who's both fair and friendly. Shot in the leg, bone's shattered, no exit wound." She didn't bother to hide the pain in her voice. That'd be too much like a lie. "Going to the hospital would lay me up way too long and result in questions I'm not willing to answer."

"Jesus, Rey. That's not good. If you were a one of us, it wouldn't slow you down long. Even if you were hurt badly enough to overwhelm your recuperative abilities Chaska knows how to speed up even our healing ability. But you don't have that." Lyla thought about it. "Back in Eldon Well, Ramiel's woman, Aria, was able to patch people up really well. So I'd advise finding a witch if you need a quick patch." From her tone, Rey could tell there were still feelings of hurt and jealousy about it. Aria was the mother of Ramiel's only child and Ramiel had doted on both — after Lyla had lost the child she and Ramiel would have had before it was born.

"I know one." Rey made a face against the pain throbbing in her leg. "I appreciate your advice. When I'm up and walking around again, there's someone I'd like you to meet."

"Your friends are always interesting," Lyla said. "I'm sure I would enjoy meeting her. Or him."

"Him. Most definitely him. I've got to make that other call. I'll talk to you again soon."

"I hope so."

Rey closed the connection. "Lyla can't help. Time to call Marie." Rey immediately dialed her sister's number.

Marie answered right away. It sounded like there was a buzz of conversation in the background when Marie spoke. "Rey?" She sounded worried.

"Expecting my call, were you?" Rey asked, only half in jest.

"Caller ID. What's up?."

"I need your help." Rey gave her sister a description of her injury. "There's too much at stake for me to be laid up in the hospital, especially now."

"Damn. That sounds bad. You probably shouldn't be moved." After Rey told she'd already been moved into Richard's truck, Marie said, "Well whatever damage might have been done, is done then. Okay, the club has a back entrance. Tell him to take you there and knock on the door. I'll be waiting. I can't heal you, but Yvonne is here with me and she's pretty good at this. We were having a, uh, meeting."

"I understand. We're on our way." Rey hung up and repeated Marie's instructions, and then waited to see if

Richard had any comment about the nature of Blood Tears. He didn't make a remark, which meant either he didn't remember what Blood Tears was about, or he was too worried to care right now.

—

Richard had driven as fast as he could and still stay close to the legal limit to get Rey to the club. Entering through the back door meant they went directly into the basement of the club so there wasn't anything to give away what was going on the two floors above, other than the pounding of music through big speakers.

He got a lot of attention. Marie, Aurra, and Yvonne were there as well as a half dozen women Rey didn't know. All stared in shock at Richard. He realized pretty quickly that these were Ishtar's witches. Aurra said he had to wait outside in the back loading area. It took some assurances from Rey, but he finally backed off. There were enough frightened witches with real power here that a confrontation could have ignited unpleasant consequences. Marie did her best to calm them down, but it was Aurra's establishment and she was determined there would be no men in their "sacred space" tonight.

They cleared a table of various ritual implements as well as the silk cloth that had covered it. It was cold and made of marble. They carefully removed the bandages and after exposing her wound, Yvonne put her hands on it and sent her magic coursing through. It burned like Rey had just been lit on fire and it took everything Rey had to keep from screaming bloody murder and sending Richard crashing through walls to "save" her. Rey was sure it hurt worse than getting shot in the first place.

And then the pain was gone. The healing had taken only an instant and now there was no mark at all. No pain, nothing. The only indication she'd been shot at all was the blood on her clothes.

Yvonne smiled and put something into Rey's hand and then closed her fingers over it. When Rey looked, she saw it was the bullet. Letting out a huge sigh of relief, she gave the assembled witches a heartfelt smile. "I truly appreciate what you've done for me, Yvonne. If you ever find yourself in need of help, and it's something I can help with, please contact me.

"And I bet you're wondering how I ended up getting shot," she said to Marie. "Do you remember my friend Mizuko? She's been kidnapped. When she didn't act all docile and co-operate, they shot me to get her attention. I managed to escape, but we were held in two separate locations. I have no idea where she is. They're hurting her. Bad."

Marie was surprised and upset. "Who would do something like that? She was so..." Marie frowned.

"A vampire." Rey had no hesitation in saying it; Ishtar would have "opened their eyes" to the presence of other supernaturals. Or at least she was pretty sure Ishtar would have, if only so the creatures could be avoided.

Marie expression changed to anger. "A vampire has her. A monster!" Several of the other women muttered to one another. "How can we help?"

"We need to find her," Rey replied immediately. "If I could get something of Mizuko's, something she valued or even a couple strands of her hair, can any of you use it to help locate her? They've had my friend for two hours, and he's messing with her mind. There's no telling the damage he can do, and the longer he has her, the less likely it is we can save her and try to fix what he's done."

Marie nodded. "I can use a sympathetic connection to let us see her, if she isn't too far away. That's not the same as locating her, but it's something."

"What's your range limit?" Rey asked. "I'm pretty sure she's somewhere in Mythic. Unless they've learned I've escaped and have taken off somewhere else to hide. I'll call her roommate to see what we can get. But

first, I have to reassure my mate that I'm alright." Bullet still in her fist, she slid off the altar and went to Richard.

"Well," Marie said, "if that's the case then I should be able to use a crystal ball to see her."

Rey stopped in midstep and turned back to her sister. "That would be great. Do you need anything from me to help?"

Marie nodded. "Yes. Something of Mizuko's. I need a strong connection for it to work."

"Okay. I'll make sure to get the best thing I can." Rey reached to get her phone out of her purse then remembered she'd left it in Richard's care. "I'll call you as soon as I have something." As she opened the door, her lips curved into a smile and she walked directly to him. She wrapped her arms around him for a brief but tight and heartfelt hug. Richard sighed in relief to know Rey was on her own two legs again and held her close.

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Xavier gathered papers from the small printer attached to Ellie's computer and carefully placed them in order in a file. Here was everything his client would need to know. There were some details yet to consider carefully, some more programming to put in place so that the subject performed as expected for her new master.

This one was remarkable in ways completely unexpected. Her capture had revealed to him, and therefore his client, not only that the subject was no mere human but that she was but one of many. Fortunately, she was no more resistant to his talents than any other human. A fatal flaw, one might say.

Still, while the girl's unexpected power was a gift that was going to make him very rich, it brought with it some complications. The client would want to deal with it and ask advice, but Xavier was not inclined to handle it for him. He took the file to his desk, sat down, and began making some notes.

—

Leopold met Xavier less than an hour later. He'd arrived in his favorite suit and flanked by a pair of his most trusted retainers. Both ghouls, both well trained to act as bodyguards. Xavier went over in detail what he'd already reported to Leopold. When they were done, Leopold had a few questions.

"So. Remy Deprez was going to use his little pet against us. Just like he somehow managed to manipulate a pack of werewolves to try to kill me. He's changed the game and now that I know he was going outside the rules to enlist the aid of yet more creatures not of kindred or kine, I have a mind to use it myself."

Xavier nodded. "I thought you might see it that way. That said, the girl is powerful. Dangerous."

"She seems susceptible enough to your manipulation."

Xavier nodded again. "Indeed. Nevertheless, it is wise to go to some extra lengths to ensure there is no slip. She is likely to turn on you like a snake."

"I've handled plenty of women, Xavier," Leopold sneered. "I doubt one fairy girl will give me trouble I can't handle."

"No doubt," Xavier agreed. "Nevertheless she has a capacity for destruction and a strength that were... unexpected. She actually transformed the composition of her body to some kind of cold crystal. Ice perhaps. Then burst into flames."

"So your report said. Frankly it's a little hard to believe."

"Rest assured it is true. Furthermore, she picked up a couch that took two ghouls to maneuver into the room, as if it were nothing more than a branch she might use as a club. Since that kind of power is unsettling, I delved into her mind after the initial programming session to see if we might put some of this into perspective."

Xavier pushed the file he'd readied to Leopold who then began leafing through it while Xavier continued. "Her 'kind' I suppose you might say are as diverse as the animal kingdom. No two are really alike. And so, while there might not be another fairy that can pull the stunts this girl can, they may have other tricks. I recommend separating her from her kind. Discourage them from nosing around."

"How would you suggest I do that?"

"Ask her to do it. She believes she loves you. She'd do anything for you."

"Love? Why would you put such nonsense into her head?" Leopold was already thinking of the unpleasantness that would cause. Fauning, drooling slaves like that were such a time sink.

"Well, she's not entirely... sane. The most certain bridle I could find to put in place was linked to her own desires. Lust. If she thinks she's romantically involved with you, it should be easy to manipulate her into doing whatever you like, with little chance of her programming fraying."

Leopold rolled his eyes. "No wonder Remy had this girl wrapped around his little finger. The vampire manages to have any number of women eating out of hand. Okay." Leopold considered.

"I assure you, she is not unpleasant to look at. It wouldn't be so hard to --"

Leopold waved his hand. "Is there anything else I should know about handling her?"

Xavier continued. "She seems a rather lonely person. It was all in the report. Years spent nearly alone in some kind of spring in the wilds. Then another year on the streets of this city, followed by solitude by living in Ottowi Pond."

"That part I found a little hard to believe. How could she do that?"

"Apparently the core of her nature has something to do with water. She can adapt to breathing water or air."

"That's rather pathetic. Being she lives in New Mexico."

"The irony did not escape me," Xavier assured him.

"When do I meet her?"

"Now. Do not be concerned if she tests her memory and perhaps the boundaries of her perceived relationship with you. The memories may seem a little... vague until reinforced by reality. Simply correct her as you need."

Leopold knew all that already, and impatiently waved for Xavier to proceed.

The two vampires stood up and Xavier led him to a recreation room that sported a large TV, a billiards table, a bar and even some benches and equipment for working out. It was an executive suite and it had executive diversions.

Mizuko lay draped across across a leather couch with her head resting upon the arm. Leopold paused to look at her. He'd forgotten how exquisitely beautiful she was. He hadn't considered her very much since the party where he first saw her on Remy Deprez's arm, except as a thing to take away from Remy. A toy he could use and break that might hurt Remy or at least cause him embarrassment. But given the girl's powers, now Leopold realized he had the instrument of Remy's destruction — and his path to ruling this city.

Mizuko's eyes fluttered and then opened. She looked up at the huge black man dressed in a fine suit in front of her in puzzlement for a moment. Then her eyes lit up and she sat up. "*Leopold! My love, I have missed you.*"

Leopold tried out her name, rolling it around in his mind, tasting it. "Mizuko."

She flung herself at him and embraced him like a long lost lover. Compared to his line-backer size, she seemed a delicate waif. Compared to his hard-packed muscle and hard lines, she was all soft curves and classic beauty. It seemed incredible to him she was capable of the feats Xavier had attributed to her.

He wrapped his huge hand around the back of her neck and made her look at him. "You know I prefer to be called master."

Mizuko, unable to move in that grip reddened. "*I'm so sorry. I forgot.*" She blinked in confusion. "'Master.'"

She felt him shift his grip on her, his hand releasing her neck and shifting to her waist, then pulling her to his side. It felt so good not to be alone, to have his solid, cold body next to her, she didn't complain.

She had no idea what Leopold was talking about when he told Xavier, "It's good work so far, but if I'm paying you triple, then I need to test the merchandise, make sure it won't break the first time I use it. Do you still have Jonas?" Xavier nodded cautiously. Mizuko noticed his eyes flicked to her while he licked his lips. People were always ogling her. "Good. Bring him here dressed for work. And Ellie as well."

"I don't think it wise to push the work we have done--"

Leopold made a slicing motion with his hand. "If your services are to hold, then this is what must be done. I don't have the time to do everything myself."

Xavier nodded, and left to make the arrangements.

When Leopold sat down on the couch to wait, Mizuko was thrilled to find he let her sit in his lap and touch him. She rested sedately against his powerful chest while they waited.

It wasn't long before a man dressed in leathers and straps appeared along with a pretty blonde in a tube top and red miniskirt. Mizuko thought she looked familiar, but couldn't place her. The blonde, Ellie, had brought in some coils of rope. Mizuko wondered if they were performers of some kind.

She felt Leopold pet her hair, running his thick fingers through it. She enjoyed the sensation.

"My pet, you have had a strenuous night."

Mizuko knew it was true. She must have used her magic because much of it was gone.

"I know how you must feed to be strong, but you know how I dislike it when you feed upon my emotions.

Instead, I want you to take what you need from these."

"*Master?*" she said uncertainly.

"Let them fuck you. Make them feel good and then, do what you need to make yourself strong. You're going to need your strength."

Mizuko looked at Ellie and Jonas uncertainly. She remembered having sex with a man and a woman before, but it was so vague.

"Do it," Leopold ordered. He could have enforced it with his will, but he wanted to test her willingness to obey, test Xavier's implanted memories.

"*Yes, master,*" she said softly.

Mizuko approached them with a little smile. Leopold sat back to observe what his new pet could do.

—

Midnight

Rey dialed the number she had for Mizuko's apartment, hoping Amber was home. If she wasn't, Rey would have to go with Plan B.

A sleepy female voice answered the phone. Given the hour, it wasn't a surprise. "Hello?"

"Amber?" Rey said. "I'm sorry to wake you, but I need your help."

"Sure, Ms. Lafitte." Amber sounded like she was beginning to wake up.

"I need something of Mizuko's. Something she's really attached to, that's important to her. Or some of her hair, or even fingernail clippings." Rey debated for a split second what else to say. "Mizuko's been kidnapped, and I need those things to help find her."

"Kidnapped?" It took a second for Amber to grasp how that might be done, but she couldn't believe Rey would make that up. "Okay. She doesn't place a lot of importance on things, you know? I'll get her hairbrush. Will you be stopping by or do I need to meet you somewhere?"

"We should be at your building in about fifteen, twenty minutes," Rey replied. "See you then."

As soon as she ended her call with Amber, she dialed Lyla's number again. It rang for a while, then went to voicemail. "Lyla, it's Rey. Sorry to be calling again so late. I'm not sure if it can be done, but I've got the bullet that was in my leg. Can you use a spirit to track down the gun it was fired from? If you can, let me know and I'll meet up with you to give you the bullet. I appreciate it."

"Who's Lyla?" Richard asked curiously.

"A really old and good friend, and a werewolf." Rey looked at him as he drove. "She's the mate of the alpha of the Storm Front pack of Santa Fe. Werewolves have a lot of dealings with spirits. Not spirits of the dead, but things like tree spirits or lust spirits."

Richard looked puzzled and interested, but this wasn't the time to bog Rey down with a lot of explanations. He nodded and let her continue making her calls.

Rey sighed, and looked at her phone. "Time to call Less and let him know what's going on." She dialed his number.

Less was dreaming. He was walking through white feathers, as if rank upon rank of swans were forming an archway with their wings for him to walk through. The air was cold and the ground was smooth and slippery as ice. He glided along, feathers brushing past his face, causing his eyes to blink. He could hear chiming of bells like ice falling, and a woman singing. "Jadis?" he called. The bells got louder. He couldn't find his way out of the feathers. The bells were insistent.

He woke up and fumbled for his phone. It was ringing and vibrating at the same time and was walking itself near to the edge of the bedside table. "King Winter! King... Uh, yeah?"

"Less, it's Rey. Mizuko's been kidnapped."

He sunk heavily into his pillow. It seemed like the Fates hadn't woven the threads of Mizuko's fate. They had just cleaned their hairbrush and left the tangled bundle to stand in. "Where?" he asked, swinging his legs over the edge of his bed.

"I don't know where she is now, but it happened a couple of hours ago. We were having dinner at the Dragon Lotus, that new Chinese place on Marlborough. She was taken by a vampire, who messed with both our heads." Rey glanced at Richard as he drove. "I've already got some stuff in motion to find her, but I wanted to let you know what was going on."

"Okay, thanks. Do you need any help?"

"Being able to find their car would be good," Rey said, "but I don't have a license plate. Oh wait. Can you find out who owns a particular condo?" She gave him the address of where she'd been held captive. "We might be able to use that to narrow down where Mizuko might be being held."

"You might as well give me a description of the car as well. You never know."

"A black charger with dark tinted windows."

"Got it. I'll call if anything turns up."

"Something else, before I forget. Could you try and get a hold of Veridia and let her know what's happened?"

"of course."

The sleep had fled Less as the situation filled him with worry. He walked to the kitchen to put the kettle on, then started making calls to see if his agents could come up with anything on the car or condo.

Less thought the call was going to flip to voicemail, but Veridia answered after the fourth ring. "Hello?"

"Veridia, it's Less. Sorry to bother you at this late hour but it is serious. Your Legate has been kidnapped by a vampire. Rey is trying to track her, and I'm going to chase down some leads. We thought you should know as soon as possible. You don't have any way to get in touch with her, do you?"

There was a pause as Veridia considered what Less told her. Then there was a quiet "Damn. I was afraid something like this would happen. As a leader of a freehold, we try to protect our people. But we can't always fix everything. Less, that girl is like a daughter to me. That's the truth. I taught her in some of the same things I know. I taught her to perceive and speak with ghosts, which I use far more frequently than I do the phone to send her instructions. But the ghosts that have agreed to work for me as a courier between us are afraid of vampires. Mortally so. I will try to contact her, but it is my fear that I will be unable to get word to

or from her so long as there is a vampire near."

He knew it! There had to have been a way they were passing secret messages. Very clever, indeed. But ghosts afraid of vampires - that was some interesting, if unwelcome, news. "Well, Fidelius was clearly not afraid of vampires. If you happen on any spirits willing to pass messages, let me know. I'll get on with trying to dig up some information."

"Spirits are not the same as ghosts at all," Veridia said. "Ghosts are what is left when a mortal dies. Spirits were never a living part of this world at all, and not subject to the Contracts we have with this world."

"I'll send a ghost to watch your back, Less," she continued. "If you get in trouble, then I'll know soon enough and send help." Of course, knowing she could send ghosts to watch people with virtually no chance of them being spotted was interesting news as well.

After that call, Less spread word to his Bleak Seal agents to get them searching for the black Dodge Charger.

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Rey tucked her phone back into her purse then looked over at Richard. "I asked Less to contact Veridia so that I'd have a bit more time to get answers before a potential interrogation."

At that moment, Rey's phone rang and she grimaced. When she looked down at the display she blinked. "That was fast," she said and held the phone to her ear. "Hello Remy." She listened to what the vampire had to say. "I see. Do you have any way to find out who he is?"

Rey nodded. "Good. Call me when you've found out anything more." The corner of her mouth twitched. "If I feel you've put in a legitimate effort, then no, I won't. Good evening, Remy."

"Won't what?" Richard asked.

"Won't forward every scrap of information I have about him and a couple of his friends to those who would find it very useful." Rey settled back and adjusted her seatbelt. "I took advantage of some of my contacts and my free time a while ago to find out everything I could about Remy. Documented it all, and made a couple of copies and put them in safe places. I told him if he ever hurt those I cared about, or wouldn't help if another vampire harmed them, I'd use the info and not feel a moment's regret."

"Do you really have anything someone could use against him?" Richard asked. "And someone who could actually use it?"

"I have documentation proving he owns about three quarters of the commercial real estate along the main routes between Mythic and Santa Fe, as well as a couple of residences that he could be using as havens or safe houses. And a few other things." The slight curve of her lips disappeared. "And yes, I do know people who could use it, and if they're not available, I have a way to contact others."

Richard was quiet for a moment as he digested what she'd told him. "He might be doing the same thing you've done."

"I know," Rey said with a little nod. "I'd be very surprised if he hasn't." She watched his face, and it was only because she knew him well that she could see he was struggling with something.

Finally, he simply said "Is there anything in your past that could pose a problem if the vampire found out

about it?"

"Yes," she replied honestly. "Some of it there's no way to prove, others not quite so much. Do you want to know what I did?"

He nodded.

"Specifics?" His cautious glance gave her his answer.

"My parents were con artists and used me in their cons. After that, I was involved with the money side of brothels for a very short time and acted as a fence. And once I was in possession of a briefcase of drugs, which I promptly got rid of. I am no longer involved in any of those things, or crime in general."

He thought about what she said and after a few moments he said "I appreciate your honesty."

"My reputation is very important to me now," Rey added. "As Witch of the Bitter Wind, what I do reflects upon our Court and our Queen. I can't afford to mess up. But I did when I told Remy about the information I had. I was so angry with him, with the situation at the time, that I just told him. As soon as the words were out of my mouth, I knew I'd done something stupid. But I can't go back and change it."

Richard flashed her a wry smile but said nothing.

When they pulled up in front of Mizuko's apartment building, Amber was waiting for them.

Amber was always sharp without being nosy. She saw Rey's bloodied skirt. When she disappeared for a moment to retrieve a brush, she returned with the brush and accompanying hairs in a ziplock bag as well as a folded pair of jeans. The jeans were Amber's; she guessed they wore about the same size. Amber offered Rey the use of the bathroom to clean up and change.

After Rey had a chance to change, the young woman asked if she could come with Rey, if there was anything she could do to help. Rey was going to say no, but when she thought about how close Amber and Mizuko were, she realized Amber likely would try to help on her own and get into trouble. In the end, Rey told Amber she could join them, but if either she or Richard told her to stay in the car, Amber had better do it.

Rey called Marie and told her she had some of Mizuko's hair. Marie told Rey to meet her at Marie's house because she had a bonafide crystal ball there, one she was used to using. Marie would be able to cast the spell immediately then. Rey told her sister that Richard and Mizuko's friend Amber would be with her, and asked if Marie would prefer them not to be present when she was working her magic. Marie said it didn't matter to her either way.

At Marie's, Rey introduced Amber to Marie as the girl gave Marie the baggie with the brush and hair.

Amber looked between them. She could see past Rey's Mask now, but she remembered what Rey looked like and it was so like Marie, the resemblance couldn't be mistaken.

Marie looked at the clock. Three in the morning. The numerous trips across town were definitely eating up the night.

"Okay everyone," Marie said. "Help yourself to refreshments in the fridge and have a seat. This is going to take me a little bit of effort."

While Rey, Richard and Amber made themselves comfortable, Marie set an object draped in a black silk cloth carefully on a stand on her kitchen table. She dragged a chair up and sat down, took a moment to clear

her mind, then took out the brush. She then drew the cloth off the crystal ball. It wasn't huge; it was about the size of two fists put together. If it had been carved of real crystal, then judging by the clarity, it would have been expensive.

Marie spent the next ten minutes staring into the ball. Finally she said, "Wait. I'm getting something." Whatever she saw wasn't visible to anyone else. "Oh. Oh my. Um. Rey? I'd say your friend is doing... fine. She's just a little, ah, busy right now."

"She's busy? What is she... You're kidding." Rey shook her head in disbelief. "Can you see who she's with?"

Marie nodded. "She's in a room. A workout room of some type I think." Marie's face was red. "I feel like a peeping Tom. Are you sure she was kidnapped? She's sort of tied up but she by no means looks unwilling."

"I am so going to kill Mizuko when she gets home," muttered Amber.

"No, she was kidnapped," Rey replied, and told them what happened at the condo - and why she'd been shot. "Xavier, the vampire who took her, he must have already messed with her head. As much as Mizuko can have trouble controlling her libido, I don't think she'd be having sex with two strangers like that." She looked at Amber. "She wouldn't, would she?" Had things changed with Mizuko that she'd have sex with anyone?

"Well," Amber considered, "maybe you are right. She was so excited to be dating Drake now. I've never seen her so excited about anyone before. Sex was one of the ground rules. Mizuko told me he didn't want their relationship to start off as a physical one, so he set a ground rule that there would be no sex for one month. I know she didn't care for the idea very much, but she agreed. And you know how she is about promises."

"She'd do just about anything to keep from breaking a promise once it's given." Rey shook her head. "No, Xavier or someone else must have succeeded in brainwashing her..." Her face paled. "Oh no. If they've managed to erase that fundamental part of her, then she might not remember about needing to eat goblin fruit."

Amber made a face. "You mean that nasty looking stuff she gets from God knows where and keeps in the refrigerator?"

Richard fielded this one. He glanced at Rey, then said, "Yes. It's fairy food, essentially. Mizuko's body is capable of incredible recuperative feats, but there is a price. If she doesn't eat it periodically, she will starve to death."

Marie had been half-listening to the conversation. "Okay. The two she's with. One is a woman. Late teens or early twenties. Blonde hair. Uh, obviously a natural blonde. Blue eyes. I remember Mizuko being on the petite side and this one is roughly her size. The male looks to be in his... thirties maybe. Well developed." She made a face. "Brown hair and eyes... again natural colors. He seems to like hitting his women. Some might call that playful. I wouldn't."

"Ah look. I can't get a location off this spell. Just the environment and I can't see so much as a window. Is there any reason I need to keep watching this?"

"Go ahead and stop at any time." Rey ran her hand through her hair in agitation. "I suppose the fact she's not being tortured is a blessing. I wish there was a way we could find out where she is." She bit back a yawn and tried to hide it behind a sigh. "Well, maybe we can narrow it down. I know how long it took me to go from the restaurant to the condo. That should give us a general idea of how far they might have been able to drive. Xavier undoubtedly knows I've escaped by now, but I'm hoping they won't move her until tomorrow night."

Richard put in, "You mentioned the name of the chinese place you visited before you went to the condo. I

think that's about seven or eight miles from the condo. That's a pretty big chunk of city."

Marie frowned. "Not good. I wish I had some kind of tracking spell, but those kinds of things are a lot harder than it sounds."

"Nothing is ever as easy it sounds," Rey replied, the a thought occurred to her. "I tried to call 911 right after Becka shot me in the leg. They managed somehow to intercept the call. I don't think they could be too far away to have done that. Maybe. I don't know." She felt frustrated, knowing Mizuko was in trouble but not being able to do anything about it.

Marie pointed out, "A telephone system hack could be done from anywhere, technically. It's even possible to hack your phone remotely. That's difficult to do without getting help from inside the phone company and would require some social engineering. But if I'm getting this right, messing with people's heads is what these people do. If you can get to anyone, then you can pretty much do whatever you want."

"Which means mundane channels are going to be covered," Richard said. "But what about less than mundane means? We know we are dealing with vampires, right? So we need information. Who is this guy, where does he work and how does he do his work. I suggest we talk to people who know something more about vampires than we do."

"I've already got someone working on that," Rey replied. "He said he'd call me as soon as he had any information. If anyone can find out about Xavier, Remy will."

Richard nodded, uncertain he wanted to trust that source, but lacking any better ideas at the moment. "All right. There is only so much we're going to be able to get done at this point. I suggest we get you home so you can rest," he told Rey. "You aren't going to be much use to anyone if you're too tired to think. We get some rest and in the morning if nothing comes up, we start looking around the area. Maybe the Winter King will have information on that condo as well, or at least some names we can start questioning."

"I suppose you're right," she said. She had no intention of going to sleep quite yet. After Richard left, she was going to take a cab over to the condo and get her car.

Amber cleared her throat. "I gotta make a call. Be right back." She stepped outside the trailer and sat down on the steps, then flipped open her phone and made a call to Carson.

"Amber, this is a surprise." Carson sounded a but distracted. "How might I help you this evening?"

"Another vampire took Mizuko," Amber said quickly, "and they are making her do things she wouldn't normally do."

"Remy told me she's been kidnapped," Carson replied calmly.

"It's bad, Carson. They are making her break promises! I gotta find her! Will you help me get her back?"

"I'm helping Remy, but it will take some time. Do you have any ideas?"

"I'm not sure. Rey said Mizuko was attacking them but she backed off when they shot Rey. That's how they got her. I don't know if those tactics narrow down the list though. They also intercepted Rey's call when she tried to ring 911. It seems like you have to have resources and influence to pull that off, you know? So, a vampire who can mess with your mind, has lots of resources and is totally ruthless. Shit. I've got nothing, don't I?"

"You've got a start, which is better than nothing at all."

"Here's what I'm going to do. I know about where they were having dinner, where this guy picked them up. I'm going to start poking around, asking some people I know on the street if they've seen this guy. Maybe they've seen Mizuko, too. I'm going to hit this area and work my way out until about sunup."

"I'll pick you up and we'll do it together. People who won't talk to you might talk to me. Where are you now?"

"Um. I'm not sure." She stood up and looked down the street. "Oh, there's a sign." She gave him the address.

"I know where that is. I'll be there in 15 minutes."

"Okay, see ya soon."

Richard took Rey home after Amber told them she was waiting for a ride. He got out of the truck as well, when she hopped down. She met him at the foot of the walkway to her house. "Thanks for your help tonight." Her tired smile revealed how much it meant to her.

He smiled, too, then put an arm around her shoulders. "Of course. Everyone is doing what they can right now, so we need to keep up our end — to be ready to act when it's time. So, let's get us a little rest. We'll start again in the morning."

Rey tried not to relax into him as they walked up to her porch. After she unlocked the door, she turned to face him. "I'll see you later." She went up onto her tiptoes to give him a light, gentle kiss.

"I'd intended to help you get that rest," he offered. "You're tense, upset, worried. You'll probably lie there hating me for making you lie down but knowing I'm right. Therefore, I have a solution. Let me in and you get a thorough massage - and a real rest so we can face this head on in the morning. Uh, later this morning I should say."

"Massage?" Her pulse made a delighted skip, even as a little of stab guilt poked at her. Just the thought of it started to ease the stress she was feeling, but she had wanted to do some more, go get her car and trying to narrow down where Mizuko might be being held after Richard left. That wouldn't happen if he stayed. Turning him away would likely hurt his feelings, and alert him to what she was really going to do. "Will you be staying afterward?" she asked as she opened the door with a hand behind her back.

He smiled. "Yes."

Rey's own smile lit up her face. She took two steps backward, pushing the door open and waited for Richard to join her. He did, and then they headed for the bedroom.

—

Marie had just been about to head to her bedroom when she heard the growl of a familiar motorcycle stopping in her drive. Opened the door, and clenched her night gown closed in her fist against the cold breeze.

"Amber?"

Mizuko's teenage friend stood up. "Oh hi, Marie. My boyfriend was just picking me up."

Marie glanced over at the rider. Her mouth dropped open in surprise. "What the hell?"

"Hi Marie," Carson said after he pulled off his helmet.

"Oh, you guys know each other?" Amber looked puzzled.

Marie's face turned an angry red. She opened the door and said, "You can go to hell." She then stepped inside and slammed the door.

Amber strode over to the motorcycle, and hopped on behind him. She slipped her arms around his waist and said, "Old girlfriend?"

"No," Carson said, still looking at Marie's door. "We're still seeing each other." He looked over his shoulder at Amber. "What was that about?"

"Um." Well not any more, Amber thought. "How should I know? Let's go."

Carson returned his attention to the house, his eyes drifting to where he knew Marie's bedroom was. As soon as this was over, he thought, he had to talk to Marie to find out what she thought he did this time.

Leopold had watched Mizuko with Xavier's slaves clinically. He watched her give her body to them willingly and take what seemed like an honest pleasure in the act. Jonas liked things a little rough, enjoyed domination, and Mizuko enjoyed the added spice of a little pain. She accepted Ellie's attention as well, giving as good as she received.

But it was passive. It wouldn't do. For Leopold's new plan to work, he needed her to be more aggressive, to be the seductress rather than merely a willing participant. When they were finished, Leopold told them to do it again and when Mizuko repeated her performance as a passive participant, he made them stop and start again, demanding she make them want to have sex with her.

He could see she was beginning to pick some things up, but it wasn't enough. He needed her to absorb years worth of training that Xavier's slaves already had and he simply didn't have the time it was going to take for her to learn. What he had in mind needed to happen soon — before Remy Deprez had a chance to interfere or try to take his prize back from him.

So, Leopold called Xavier back in and told him what he wanted. It would require more programming, but he needed his new pet to be capable of seducing even the most stubborn of targets. He didn't need her broken so much as guided. He needed her not to simply given in to her desire, but use it along with her looks as a weapon of subterfuge. Xavier told him that her behavior was basically ingrained in her personality, who she was. What Leopold was asking meant a great deal more work. It was not a concern for Leopold, however. He told Xavier to get on with it.

He left her in Xavier's care, assuring her that he would see her the next night. In the meantime, Leo wanted her to learn from her new partners. Showing him some new tricks when he next saw her would please him. She hesitated, but she complied immediately when he directed some of his will toward her. The captured fairy trusted him now far too much to realize the danger looking into his eyes posed to her self will.

If all went well, he would test her new skills tomorrow night and test the viability of his plan at the same time.

—

Mira awoke in an unfamiliar bed. She pushed back the finely woven sheets shifted onto her side. The small window set high in her room told her it was some time near noon and once again her head felt like it was

splitting open it hurt so much. She moaned and put a hand to her forehead, wondering if she might have a fever.

She spotted a glass of water and a pair of pills — Excedrin it looked like because it had the little "E" imprint — sitting on a little night stand next to her bed. Someone had anticipated the hangover. With a sigh, she pushed herself to a sitting position and waited for the room to stop spinning. Then she took the pills and washed them down with a big gulp of water.

A throbbing soreness in her nether area competed with a certain satisfaction. She realized three things. First, she was naked. Second, she needed a shower. Third, she had sex last night. A lot of rather athletic sex judging by the ache of her body. She remembered some of it. Leopold had been there. She smiled to herself. Kinky bastard liked to watch. That was fine with her; she liked having it.

She stood up, gritted her teeth against her headache, and looked around the room. There was a stack of neatly folded clothes on a big chair. They were hers, already cleaned and returned. Mr. Klein was always very neat like that. For a dead guy, he seemed very concerned about appearance and cleanliness. She wondered what he'd do if he found a maggot crawling around his dead flesh and laughed aloud. He'd freak out, she knew.

She ignored the clothes and headed into the private bath. When she finished taking a long, very hot shower, she wandered back and rifled through her drawers. She had no intention of wearing the same clothes twice in a row. She grabbed some fresh underclothes, comfortable jeans, and a baby tee and called it good. She padded out of her chambers on bare feet to go find something edible in the kitchen.

One the way, she passed the nook at the end of the hall where Mr. Klein had a little desk. He looked up as she strolled by.

"Good morning, Mira. I see you are up early today."

She threw him a smile. *"And I see you are up rather late — for a vampire. I didn't know you stayed up during the daytime."*

He returned her smile. He wore the distracted look everyone got when they heard Mira's enchanting voice. "Ah. Yes, well most legends about us are... dead wrong. As you well know."

Mira nodded and turned her smile into a grin.

"About that thing we discussed last night," Klein began, "are you certain you want to go through with it?"

She nodded again. *"I'm certain. It needs to be done. If I don't there will be problems."* Continuing to stay with Leopold was one of them. If she didn't take care of the issue, she didn't see how she'd be able to stay here. But after what Veridia had done, she didn't know how she could continue to work for that woman.

"I lost my phone last night," Mira stated.

"Don't worry about it," Klein stated with a smooth smile. "You can use the one downstairs. Make sure Leopold knows you've lost it when you see him tonight and I'm sure he'll replace it for you."

Mira's smile faded and she shivered. Her whole body felt like it turned to jello at the first thought of disappointing Leo. Crap she hated that feeling, but it was just how much he meant to her. She hoped he wouldn't be too angry about phone.

She nodded mutely and headed downstairs. She found a wall phone on her way to the kitchen and picked it up. She dialed the number for a little magic shop nestled in a semi-hidden corner of the city called

Incidental Enchantments.

"Incidental Enchantments," said the proprietor.

"Veridia, it's me."

"Mizuko? Are you all right? We've been worried sick about you."

"I'm fine. Listen, this isn't a social call, as if we ever had just a talk anyway. I'm calling you to tell you I quit."

"What are you talking about?"

"As Legate. I'm done being your little puppet."

"You can't just quit, Legate," Veridia stated in a formal and stern tone. "You and I made an agreement."

"Which you broke," Mira stated. "You asked me to fill that role in very specific ways, to limit myself when speaking in an official capacity to repeating only what you told me to say and nothing else. You asked me for perfect obedience. I gave that to you. I was grateful to you. You said that you would always do your best to protect me from the dangers that as Legate, I would have to face in your name. But I contend you failed utterly and that you did not even try."

"Mizuko! I have gone to great lengths to support you and your friends as well on your little adventures," Veridia said angrily.

"I'm not talking about that. I'm talking about you threatening my life based on what friends I choose."

Veridia was taken aback.

"You threatened to have me put to death because I chose to spend time with a vampire. Instead of making an attempt to protect me or discuss it with me like I was a person and not just property to you, you launched an investigation and threatened to kill me. So, Veridia, I quit. Find yourself a new lackey."

Veridia was silent while she attempted to control her temper. "Mizuko, you are an extension of my authority. I can't allow that to be abused by anyone. Tell me where you are. Let me help you."

"Mizuko means 'water child'. I'm not a child anymore and that's not my name now." The nymph continued with heat. "You want to help me? That's a laugh. You want to protect yourself, not me. Just accept that I'm not your Legate any more and neither one of us is going to have to get hurt."

Mira was suddenly tired of talking to the queen. She slapped the phone down and proceeded to the kitchen. She was pretty sure Veridia got the message anyway.

—

Saturday Morning

Less had been up for several hours phoning his agents in the Bleak Seal. He had every available eye combing Mythic for the car that had taken Mizuko. Now at the train station, he had Zoe cover the Lost and Found window for him while he cleared his desk. He began organizing the files that he would need to track the web of information he was going to be assembling. When the clock ticked over to 9:00, he picked up the phone and dialed his first call of the day.

Messages had begun to come in at a fairly steady pace of one to three per hour since the search for the

Dodge went out. Unfortunately, most sightings were later confirmed to be owned by mortals. Others were passing through.

Septimus, however, had some thoughts on how to narrow things down. He asked for details on exactly what Rey communicated to Less regarding the car and her own encounter.

"Sire, were I in such a business as kidnapping people for the purpose of brainwashing them, I would have a care for what might lead back to me. For example, Ms. Lafitte told you she escaped from them. If this is so then it is probable that they used their own vehicle. They could do that since there is no indication they intend to let their prisoner go. Also, they have the ability, apparently, to affect minds. Unfortunate we do not have a license plate number."

But Septimus had some doubts that this was really the case. "I have to wonder though that she did actually escape. Given what we have seen of the Legate's powers, she should be exceedingly difficult to capture without some kind of leverage, at least until her mind was affected. If they had intended to keep Rey prisoner, then why did they not do the same to her? If they can capture the Legate and keep her, they certainly have the ability to do the same to Ms. Lafitte. As further evidence in favor of this conclusion, our files on the Witch of the Bitter Wind indicates no particular aptitude for exploiting or resisting mental influence. No, I suggest that it was never their intention to keep Ms. Lafitte for long. She was used to ensure the cooperation of their actual target. After this was achieved, she was apparently no longer of use to them.

"This does beg another question then. Why is Ms. Lafitte still alive? Where I an evil, brainwashing vampire, I would have eliminated the witness to this act. However, they did not. I can only imagine this was because they wished to avoid a conflict with a larger organization. I'm afraid this will lead us to believe they are well aware of what Ms. Naia and Ms. Lafitte are. They have the advantage now, of knowing who they are dealing with. By allowing Ms. Lafitte to escape, I believe they are attempting to keep potential conflict with our freehold to a minimum. Damage control, if you will; Lafitte was worth more alive than dead."

Septimus seemed to be going somewhere with all this. "Therefore, sire, I suggest that our perpetrator had intended for Rey to escape. He knew, then, that it was likely she would seek her friend and knows precisely what Lafitte has witnessed. Ergo; the black Dodge Charger is likely a rental or stolen. In either case, someone capable of mental manipulation is likely to have made certain this is untraceable. Unless, of course, they have made a mistake. I will contact all rental dealerships in the Mythic metro area. I am however, not certain how to persuade them to reveal their rental agreements to me once I do find rental companies with the correct make and model."

Less considered this. "What you're telling me is that this vampire could have been driving a Smart Car. He could easily have implanted the suggestion in Rey's mind that they were driving a black Dodge charger to a particular address. So, now that she has 'escaped' she supplies us with misleading information. Devious!" Less was truly impressed. It did mean that nothing Rey told them of the encounter could be relied upon, and added the kernel of suspicion that Rey could not be trusted with anything sensitive at all. Deeply impressed, indeed. "So, what we should be looking for is inconsistencies in Rey's or other witness' stories. Some detail that the hypnotist made a mistake on."

He smacked his hand down on the pile of notes on his desk. They were probably all useless and represented several hours of lost time in finding Mizuko. "I'll tone down the search to free up some resources. Septimus, get the Cup Bearer down to Rey and get a proper interview, then over to the Chinese restaurant to get corroborating witness statements. I'll be here until my shift is over, then I'll meet up with Rey myself."

Septimus bowed. "It is fascinating, in sad way. Confusion leading to sorrow and pain might be caused by manipulation of the mind. Only there is a fatal weakness after all, is there not? Rewriting the mind does not rewrite the heart. For emotion, as we well know, can only be guided, not rewritten..." Septimus remained for a thought-filled moment, then left to do as his king bid.

An hour after Septimus left, information began to roll in. The condominium tower that Rey described was still under construction and the company insisted that no one was occupying it as yet. In fact, it was closed to the public until construction was complete. Less nodded to himself as he slowly set the receiver in its cradle. He could do nothing more until he met Rey in person. He impatiently awaited the end of his shift.

—
Elsewhere that morning...

Rey woke slowly, surrounded by warmth. Richard was spooned up behind her with his arm draped over her and holding her close. She smiled and enjoyed the comfort for a few moments more as she thought about when they'd gone to bed hours earlier.

Richard's massage was everything she'd hoped for. His hands found every knot and soothed it away. She was drowsy by the time he'd finished. Too relaxed to really care that he'd gone through her "toy box" to find the massage oils he wanted to use.

When he was done he'd gathered her up in his arms and tucked her into bed. After sliding in beside her he drew her close. She'd fallen asleep before he was even settled in.

Feeling her stir, Richard awoke as well. He checked the clock near the bed. It was well after nine in the morning. He rose to a sitting position and swung his legs off the bed, exposing a broad, muscular back to the fae woman next to him.

Rey enjoyed the view for but a moment when Richard's phone went off. It was set next to the clock, so he reached over, checked the ID and then answered. "My Queen."

He listened for minute. He glanced over his shoulder to Rey, worry etched upon his face. "My Queen, are you certain she did this of her own will? I see. Yes, of course as you command."

He disconnected and sighed. He didn't look at Rey but told her, "Mizuko contacted Veridia this morning. She resigned as Legate. Veridia sounded calm about it, which probably means she's hopping mad about it. She's ordered me to drop what I'm doing and go to her. Some kind of strategy meeting, I guess."

He rose to his feet and turned to look at Rey. "I'm sorry Rey. I had hoped I would be able to help you find her today. And if I know Veridia, you shouldn't expect help from her on this."

A rueful smile graced Rey's lips. "I understand. Try to convince her that Mizuko's not in her right mind. She is intensely loyal. Xavier has managed to destroy much of Mizuko's true self."

Richard hesitated. "Maybe so. But Veridia is not a fool. She must have good reason to believe that Mizuko's resignation was real."

"The resignation may have been real, but the manner in which it happened may not be of her design. If I were Xavier, I'd make sure Mizuko alienated everyone she is close with. No friends means greater dependence on him."

Richard nodded. "Maybe so. If what you say is true, I can't help but wonder who it is we'll be rescuing." He retrieved his clothes and pulled them on.

"Whoever it might be, we cannot leave her at the mercy of vampires." Rey slipped out of bed and handed him his belt. "And if we succeed, we need to try and help her recover as much as she can of her memories. Break that connection to Xavier if we can, otherwise she can't be trusted."

Rey didn't want to think about the consequences of that, and the threads of worry start to weave themselves into her consciousness.

Richard finished getting dressed, then pulled Rey up to him and kissed her. "Be careful. Don't go out there alone. Promise me."

Rey nodded. "I won't go looking for her alone. I promise." She sealed the promise with a kiss.

When they parted, he smiled at her. "That's all I ask." He stepped away. "Good luck." Then he was gone.

—

Amber called Rey immediately after Richard had left and told Rey that she and Carson had been searching the area around the Chinese restaurant in a widening pattern. They'd covered a pie wedge-shaped area that extended toward the north, but hadn't found much. The potential area involved was huge and of course there was a chance that by now Mizuko could have been moved any number of times. But they had to try. Maybe Xavier would make a mistake. If he did, they needed to be able to take good advantage of that.

Amber was also at Rey's door. She'd been so worried that after Carson dropped her off she didn't sleep, but instead made her way to Rey's. She'd slept some last night anyway, before Rey had called with the news. Still, she looked terrible. Smudges under her eyes and the worried pinch of her lips showed her concern. They retrieved Rey's car and then began the search again in a new area northeast of the restaurant.

By the end of the day, Amber and Rey were tired of walking and searching. They went to meet Les at the end of his shift.

Les had received further word from Septimus. He had questioned all the auto rental places in and near Mythic and got some numbers. There were quite a few black Chargers available, and several that had been rented the previous night. He would attempt to track down the renter to see if one might match Xavier, though that might take time and some finesse.

He also suggested that an interview between the Cup Bearer and Rey Lafitte might go more smoothly if Les himself were present. Lafitte likely didn't know the Cup Bearer or her function and therefore might rightfully be reluctant to speak. But if the King made the introduction and they might more swiftly get to the heart of the matter and allow the Cup Bearer to do her work.

Said Cup Bearer, a young woman of the Fairest persuasion, was waiting for Les near his office. At the end of the shift, she approached him immediately and made the appropriate greetings. Saya was a polychromatic Fairest, a dazzling person to behold, a master of moods whose own shifted in puzzling ways. She had the unusual trait of being a Spring Courtier while also a Warden of the Bleak Seal. Her eyes changed colors like pinwheels and her hair did likewise. As the Bearer of the Tearful Cup, she was a master of communications and was exquisitely qualified to read emotion and find the truth behind words.

Rey and Amber arrived minutes later. Both were eager to hear any news the Bleak Seal might have been able to uncover. To everyone's disappointment, Les was forced to announce that he had not been able to turn up any further information regarding Mizuko's whereabouts. After delivering the bad news, he brought Saya over to Rey.

"Rey, this is Saya," he said presenting the colourful changeling. "She is one of my Wardens. We'd like to go over what you remember about Mizuko's abduction again."

Once they had retired to a quiet and more private location to talk, Less explained the situation fully. "Rey, I don't want to alarm you, but I spoke with the strata of the condo address you gave me. The building is not yet finished and no one has yet moved in. Septimus confirmed it. We think that its possible the vampire that abducted Mizuko managed to obscure the details of the events in your mind. If you recount everything in detail once again, I hope Saya here might be able to pick out inconsistencies in your memories. Hopefully, that might give us something to go on."

Rey sighed heavily. "I never said anyone was living there. Just that I was taken and held there. You know as well as I do how easy it is for people to get in and out of places if they really want to." She gave him a pointed look, then turned to Saya. "Mizuko and I went to the Dragon Lotus for dinner," she said, and related step by step what happened that night. She included being shot in the leg, how she managed to convince Becka to let her go, and how she got her leg healed - and the fact Richard could corroborate the fact she was at that condo and the wound gunshot to her leg.

"It does occur to me they might have planned to release me later, but I doubt it would have been before Xavier was finished whatever it was he planned for Mizuko," she said when she was finished recounting what happened.

"This is why we're doing this interview, Rey," said Less patiently. "You never mentioned before that the condo building was unfinished. If Xavier has implanted false memories, it is the minor details that he might made mistakes on. We will interview people at the Dragon Lotus - first time you've mentioned it by name, by the way - and see if anyone saw something different."

"I never mentioned it was unfinished because I didn't notice if it was or if it wasn't. Going in there, I had no idea I was walking into trouble, and I was more concerned with getting away and getting help than to evaluate my exact surroundings. So. Do you believe me, or do you think everything I've said is nothing but lies?" A tired smile played across her face.

Saya stepped in and held up her hands placatingly. "No one is suggesting anything of the kind. But you said yourself that both you and Mizuko had been mentally manipulated by this vampire. Of course we assume you are telling the truth."

She paused, judging Rey's reaction to that, then continued. "So you understand then that we just don't know what else he might have done to your memory. I know you must feel absolutely confident about your own memory. How could you not? Yet we must nevertheless be very careful about what assumptions we make. Now, may I ask some specific questions about the place in which they held you?"

"Go ahead," Rey replied. "I'll answer as best I can."

"I'm a little curious about the room they held you in. First, since you were shot there," she glanced at significantly at Rey, "there would be a good deal of blood there. Someone would need to clean that up in order to avoid police interference. That someone would have to be associated with our vampire opponent. Yes?"

"Most likely. Or the vampire could have some measure of influence over the officers involved."

"Perhaps either connection is a lead," she suggested. "Perhaps there is something else you might remember that could lead us to your friend. Mizuko, wasn't it?"

Rey nodded.

"Can you tell us about that video camera that they had trained on you? Were their wires coming from it other than a power cord?"

Rey shook her head. "No, there weren't."

"I'll be honest with you. I don't know what that might mean, so I will leave that to you all to figure out." Saya then asked, "When you saw her in the monitor, do you recall seeing any windows or hearing any sounds?"

"No sound," Rey said. "That's why I used sign language to tell her what Xavier was." She paused and thought for a moment. "I didn't see any windows. But the apartment was very expensively furnished. Antiques. I think I saw several Queen Anne chairs, and a table from the period. The couch was Regency-era. And there was a sacramental cabinet on the far side of the room. Really good condition from what I could see through the camera. Mizuko did a real number on the couch, and I don't think they can repair it. He'll have to replace it."

Saya had watched Rey's recitation with intense curiosity. She nodded to both Rey and Less. For the Constable, it was a signal that she found no inconsistencies in Rey's story. That meant either this Xavier was so good they stood no chance, or that Rey had not been manipulated so badly that her memory should be suspect.

Saya looked thoughtful. "I am not certain if my questions have helped. It does seem like there are some things you can check on and I hope that it provides some direction to your investigation. The only thing I might be able to offer, if you are interested in hear it?"

"Please," Rey said. Her and Amber's investigations had turned up nothing so far, and she hadn't yet heard back from Remy. Without any other leads, they were stuck.

"I've never heard of any changeling or fae who had power of the will of another person before. Such is not our domain, but it apparently belongs to vampires. I can hardly imagine a more frightening fate that losing who you are. But." Saya paused to look at both Less and Rey. "Our domain is the heart. Emotions. This is where we reign supreme. We have our own criminals who would warp the heart, plant false love, twist fears and such things. But perhaps these vampires cannot tread upon our domain. Perhaps your friends heart remains her own, even if her mind is not. Once you find her, maybe this will help you... find her again."

Rey nodded, then looked to Amber. "We need to get Drake involved in this."

Saya didn't know the significance of that, but she deferred to the Winter King.

While Rey was talking to Amber, Less privately thanked Saya, leaning in close to give her a few instructions. Saya squeezed his hands and slipped away, waving goodbye.

"Well, that is a relief," he said, rejoining them. "This situation is very unsettling."

Amber said, "I was just telling Rey I don't know how to contact Drake. I think his number was on Mizuko's phone." She looked sad. "Poor guy. Mizuko was so excited about their date tonight."

"Tonight? When and where were they supposed to meet?" Rey asked.

"Drake was going to pick her up at our place at 4:30. Then they were going to go to this gastro pub here in Mythic," Amber said.

"Then we need to get back to your place." Rey stood. "With his help we might be able to get through to her." And have someone on-hand to help take her down if it came to that, she thought. Worst case scenario planning.

"My time might be better spent following up some leads here," said Less. "Like putting surveillance on antique furniture shops."

While Les took care of setting some people to check on antique shops, Rey and Amber returned to Mizuko's apartment to await Drake's arrival. Amber was a bundle of worries, especially over talk about Mizuko no longer being the person they might know and love. There wasn't anything for it, though but to try to see it through the best they could and Amber understood that.

Less finished his arrangements early. Worm would check on the antique shop angle herself. Freed of that task, Less decided to meet with Veridia. Together, they might be able to convince the telephone company to give them the number from which Mizuko had called to quit the Autumn Queen's service.

The closest he got was to leave a message with someone in her service. It seemed that the Queen was away in the Hedge, because she could not be reached by phone at all, nor was her store open. However, an hour later, she returned his call. She told him that she wasn't sure about getting the phone company's cooperation — wouldn't that require a search warrant from the police? It wouldn't be easy since the caller wasn't on a listed number in any case.

Veridia did tell him, however, that she'd also found out that Rey was meeting with a vampire who might know something and that she intended to be there. A quick comparing of notes proved that it was the same meeting Less was attending later at 6:30, at Otowi Pond.

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Drake stepped out of his car with a little spring in his step. He'd been looking forward to spending time with Mizuko tonight. After dinner and the movie, he hoped they might go for a walk before he had to head back home. With a smile of anticipation, he opened the door to the building and greeted the man at the security desk. After gaining permission of the residents, he was sent up to the room. Drake was unprepared for the grim expression on Amber's face when she opened the door and let him in.

"What's wrong?" he asked immediately, his eyes scanning the room for Mizuko. Drake's eyes fell on Rey. "Witch Lafitte?"

Amber burst out, "They took her! Those bastards took her and they did something to her!"

"Who?" Drake's posture changed from casual to warrior-like in an instant.

"Vampires," Amber said miserably. "We can't find her. We've been looking all last night and today. This vampire guy took her and Rey, but split them up last night. They shot Rey so that Mizuko wouldn't fight them, and they say the vampire got inside her head and won't even be Mizuko anymore." Amber put a hand to her head and tried to control her breathing before she broke down and cried.

Drake extended his arms to Amber in an offer of comfort. "Is this true?" he asked Rey.

"More or less," Rey replied. "We need your help. The vampire, Xavier, may have messed with her mind and her memories, but we're hoping he hasn't touched her heart. Mizuko's feelings for you were pretty strong. Maybe you can touch something in her, remind her of that and help bring her back."

"But we still don't know where she is," Amber put in.

Rey's phone rang. She frowned slightly. "Hello? Yes, this is Ms. Lafitte. Who is this?" She listened for a moment. "Very well. We'll be there." She disconnected the call and looked at Drake and Amber. "That was... someone who worked for Remy. We're to meet Remy and his associates at Ottowi Pond at 6:30. He'll have information for us, and has a way to find Mizuko.

"I need to let the others know." Rey dialed Less' number.

"Otowai Pond? Really?" It didn't really seem like a Remy meeting place. "Okay, that's close by. No problem." He hoped there was some occult reason for meeting at Mizuko's pond, and that it wasn't just an out of the way place for a vampire trap.

When she finished talking to Less, she called Richard, but it went directly to voicemail. "Richard, it's Rey. If you get this message in time, meet us at Ottowai Pond at 6:30 tonight. Remy's got information, and says he's got a way to find Mizuko."

Rey slipped her phone back into her purse. "We've got about two hours. Enough time to grab a bite to eat on the way."

Rey and Amber stopped at a diner, a greasy spoon with a reputation for good food and fast service. While they ate, Rey's phone rang. It wasn't a number she recognized.

"Lafitte."

"It's Veridia. I understand you requested the Paladin of Shadows to recover the Legate tonight. We will see you there. At which end of the park will you be?"

Rey paused for a moment before speaking. "I had not been expecting any official action this evening, my Queen," she said politely and carefully. She'd called Richard to let him know as a friend and lover, not as the Queen's sword - or rather axe - hand. Most importantly, she promised him she wouldn't go to rescue Mizuko on her own, and there was no other warrior she'd rather have at her side to do it. "I do not know if any extraction will be happening tonight, but we will be finding out what Remy Deprez has been able to discover. I will be near the east bank of the pond."

"I have a certain relationship with these vampires the Paladin of Shadows does not have," Veridia stated. "Perhaps I was overly optimistic to assume you might have a way to find her tonight. I suppose that means you called the Paladin because you wanted backup. If you want backup in dealing with them, you will need me."

"I too hope we will be able to get her back tonight, but I also do not wish to raise false hopes," Rey admitted. "I have no idea what information Remy has, and I promised Richard I wouldn't try to rescue her alone." The vision Mizuko'd had of her in water, apparently dead, flashed through her mind. "But if the opportunity happens, if there is a chance to go get her before more damage is done, I needed to be prepared."

"Of course. I'll see you there, Witch of the Bitter Wind." Veridia ended the call.

Amber had seen the look on Rey's face and had heard half the conversation. "Things are getting complicated," she remarked. "I hope Remy knows what he's doing."

"We shall see," Rey replied. "He has much to lose in this, if things don't go well."

At the appointed time, the various parties converged at the park. Remy was there, having moved quickly after sunset to make arrangements. So was his entire coterie, though they maintained a discrete distance. Less arrived unnoticed, but able to take stock of the situation as well.

As Rey and Amber made their way to Remy Deprez, they noticed the Autumn Queen standing not far away at the edge of the pond looking out over the water. Dressed in her voluminous black dress, she was difficult to make out when she stood still. Beyond her stood Drake, who'd arrived on his own. He was dressed as she'd first seen him in the Hedge, though his sword was not in evidence.

"Hello, Remy," Rey said, once again regretting threatening the vampire. She hated blackmail.

"Good evening, Miss Lafitte," Remy replied, his voice smooth as silk. "If only our meeting were under better circumstances. Is everyone here whom you wished to be included in the conversation?"

Queen Veridia drifted closer, now that all parties had arrived. She nodded greetings toward Drake, Remy, Rey, and even Amber, but quickly bypassed any other formalities. "I cannot believe she lived for over a year in that lake."

"I can," Rey replied. "She had no friends, and no real skills to make them. She spent much of her duration in almost complete isolation. It was all that she could remember. What she was used to." She shook her head. "Moving from there cost her a lot."

Veridia pursed her lips, then stated, "It was necessary. She was living like an animal and would become one. As I recall, when you fired her she also suffered. She would have been here again if not for this man." Veridia's black eyes glanced at Remy.

"Mizuko was earning enough at her job to afford an apartment with some roommates," Remy said. "She moved into her current apartment at my request. It put her closer to her job, and in a nicer neighborhood."

Veridia was silent and the moment stretched. Then Amber put in, "Um, Mr. Deprez, you mentioned that you had some ideas about how to find her?"

"Before I get to that, I want to tell you what I've discovered about the man who took her," Remy said. "He goes by the name of Xavier. He's very powerful, and a fixer of problems. He's known to have rewritten the memories of entire households, and create dedicated yet self-willed slaves of mortals that might have otherwise delved too far into Kindred business.

"He also has a reputation for detail, and is very, very professional. His work is handled discretely. He also has job loyalty in the sense that if you hire him to do a job you can rely on the fact that if a rival hires him, he will not undo the work he just did for you.

"With what he's capable of doing, it's unlikely someone can be found to undo his work, so other methods to bring her back will have to be tried. And that brings us to rescuing Mizuko." He paused and looked at the assembled group. "Given more time, we could probably find where they've taken her, but we don't have that time.

"So, we must resort to the connection I have with her. I can call her to me, wherever I am. It will take time for her to get here, but she will come."

It was not an easy thing to hear - that the vampire had Mizuko in some sort of thrall - but it was to their advantage now. "Then let's not waste any more time!" called Less loudly across the water in his best Winter King voice. "Call her home!"

Mira had spent the day shopping. Given a card with \$3000 on it, she was more than happy to spend her day finding outfits that matched her mood rather than having to settle for what was in her closet. She'd taxied around the city and had collected a nice pile of loot, including some jewelry that had caught her eye. It took her hours to settle on what she wanted because there was just so much to choose from and so many things that looked glamorous and exciting.

She'd ended up spending all her time at only four stores. She'd attracted a lot of attention once she accepted

the assistance of salespeople. She had cash, looks, and a desire to spend. It drew them like flies to honey. She'd wanted to look like the models in the various ads posted around the stores featuring their products and it was a fair to say she'd managed that very well.

Now laden with boxes of makeup, dresses, shoes, pairs of jeans and casual wear, as well as enough lingerie to fill a drawer, she made sure she'd be at the house by sundown. Leopold would expect her to be there, and she meant to surprise him with her new look.

After dressing she waited for him in the great room. Noticing Xavier and he speaking in the adjacent study, she afforded them privacy by keeping a discrete distance.

The door to the study slid open, revealing an unhappy Xavier. He looked at Mira once and paused. His expression showed his approval despite his sour mood. He nodded to her once and walked on by.

She watched him go and was about to ask what was on his mind when suddenly she *knew* that Remy Deprez wanted her. She turned, her first reaction to simply go, but she realized she couldn't just do that. She needed to tell Leopold first.

"Mira." Leopold's voice called to her. The sound of it sent a thrill up her spine and she turned to him with a smile upon her lips. She went to him.

"You look lovely tonight," he told her. It was a bit of an understatement, but a compliment from Leo was rare. Mira beamed. "I have something I would like you to do."

"*I'm sorry, ah, master.*" She hated calling him that. It grated on her being. She made a note to talk to him about it next time they were intimate. Perhaps he'd be more flexible then. "*I have to go out.*"

Leopold was suddenly in front of her. He seized her arm "What?"

"*Remy Deprez needs me. I need to go.*"

Leopold stared at her with cold, dark eyes. After a moment, he realized what was happening. He let go of her arm and grabbed her by the throat instead, driving her across the room and pinning her against the wall.

Mira was shocked by Leo's reaction and alarmed by the intense pressure on her throat. She grabbed his hand.

"Don't, Mira," he told her, making a supreme effort to master his temper. His rage was directed at Deprez, not Mira and he didn't want to cause a disastrous fight with his new fae slave. "This vampire is trying to control you and this is the only way to stop him. Your body and mind will tell you that you need to go to him, but right now we need time."

He looked her in the eyes and said, "I need to think."

His grip was firm, it hurt, and it was hard to breathe. Whoever was responsible for this, she decided, was going to pay for it. The trouble was, she couldn't decide if it was Leopold or Remy. Reluctantly, she chose not to call upon her magic to fight him and go to Remy.

Mira wasn't sure how long Leopold kept her pinned to the wall. He muttered to himself from time to time as he worked out a new plan. Finally he decided. With his free hand, Leopold pulled up his cell phone and called in Xavier. When the other vampire entered the great room again, Leopold explained the situation.

"Deprez is trying to summon her. I don't think he's going to quit. She's going to have to go to him sooner or later." Leopold aimed a piercing look into Mira's eyes. "Mira, you are not to mention me. He thinks I'm dead

and for now we need to keep it that way. You don't have to tell him anything at all about yourself, but if he manages to get you to talk, talk about Xavier. Avoid his eyes — any vampire that means you harm can trap you with their eyes. You can talk about what you remember of your time with him, only. Understand?"

Mira, entranced by the master vampire's power, moved her head slightly in the affirmative.

He released her of his dominating stare and addressed Xavier. "You'll need to get out of town immediately, Xavier. Deprez and his crew will likely blame you for everything. I'll let you know when and if it is safe to return."

Xavier wasn't terribly happy about the situation, but it wasn't the first time he had to get out of town because of his work. He nodded and left the room without further word.

Once Xavier was gone, Leopold relaxed his grip and then let her go. Mira rubbed her neck and took deep, ragged breaths. "I know you have to go, Mira," he said quietly. "I will miss you. Please come home as soon as you can."

Mira had perked up at mention that Leo would miss her. She nodded. "*I will.*"

"And Mira?"

She looked a question at him.

"I would prefer to keep Deprez alive. We have a use for him. But, if he says or does anything you don't like, kill him. Kill him for me, and for yourself."

She smile. "*I will, my love.*"

She rose to her feet, bowed her head to him and then glided from the room with the poise and grace of a queen. Mira noted that Leo didn't mind her calling him 'my love'. It was far preferable to the demeaning, 'master'. She smiled and prepared herself to meet Remy.

—

More than two hours passed. The group had waited, sometimes patiently, sometimes not so much, as time crawled by. It was cold out and while it agreed with the Winter King, and the vampires hardly felt it, it was uncomfortable for everyone else.

Amber had asked for the third time whether Remy's call had really be heard when Minerva heard a quiet footfall. Moments later, everyone else did as well.

The woman that approached Remy was the Mizuko they remembered, but there were marked differences. First was that she was dressed in a fine wool coat with dual columns of buttons that lined the front just after the V. She wore a long scarf of pale green and thin, black leather gloves. Her dark hair tumbled from beneath a knit hat, framing a pale face and ruby lips. She even wore long, sparkling earrings and the cut of her coat was low enough to reveal the sparkling prize she wore around her neck; a chain that integrated an attractive selection of polished and cut stones. Her natural beauty was enhanced further with a light application of makeup. The overall effect was heart-stopping.

The only things that detracted from it were the dark, ugly bruises that ringed her neck.

Mira walked slowly past Minerva and Carson, nodding to each as she did. "*Minerva. Carson. Good evening,*" she said. She felt their eyes on her as she passed, but didn't stop until stood in front of Remy. Her eyes swept past him as she noticed for the first time Queen Veridia. She ignored the other changelings, then turned her

attention back to Remy

"Remy Deprez. Why have you called me?"

Rey had watched Mizuko's approach, trying to read her friend. Mizuko didn't appear to feel threatened, but there was something different about her. To Rey, she wasn't quite the woman she'd known yesterday. "We were worried about you."

Mira turned to look at Rey for the first time. She stared at Rey blankly for a moment. "Why?"

A slightly stricken expression covered Rey's face. "Because we're friends. Because you were kidnapped last night."

"Friends?" Mira tried to be patient. *"I hardly know you."* She turned away, but Veridia caught her eye. Mira bowed her head, a simple formal acknowledgement. The queen said nothing but studied Mira carefully. *"In any case, I'm fine."*

To Mira the gathering was a little overwhelming. Why was the Winter King here? As well as the Autumn Queen? It didn't make any sense to her.

Less was silent as he watched Mizuko arrive. He had been warned that this would be a delicate situation which relied on invoking the emotions of her former self. Kings and Queens could not command her. He hoped there was enough of her heart left for her to hear its orders. Less used the fatherly voice he often used when giving her advice, "It's nice to have you home, Mizuko."

She looked at him curiously, then took a couple steps toward the lake. *"Home? I suppose it was once."* She looked over the icy-choked waters. *"That was when I took that name, you know. Mizuko means 'water child'. But, I'm not a child anymore. I prefer Mira for a name."*

"You're definitely not a child," Drake said, stepping forward, "and you're definitely late for our date. You were so looking forward to it. As was I."

Mira turned toward him, noticing him for the first time when he began speaking. She didn't remember him at all, yet her heart thundered in her chest and she felt her body react to his presence. She heated up. "Wow," she said. *"I think you've got the wrong person, but if I were available, I'd probably say yes to a date."* She gave him her best steamy smile.

"How can you not possibly remember," Remy said, his voice smooth as silk. "You threw me over for him."

"It's true," Annabeth added. "You wanted what Drake could give you, things a vampire couldn't."

She looked doubtful, as she turned again, maneuvering to keep speakers in front of her. Still, she didn't dismiss what they told her entirely. *"I know I stopped seeing you for someone else, Remy. But don't try to play with my head. I was warned about your tricks."*

Less noticed Mira was subtly edging closer to the water.

Amber, however, was looking in a different direction, staring off along the dark shore as it arced away to the north.

Movement in the shadows near the northern shore of the pond caught the attention of Rey and all the vampires. "Did you ask some of your werewolf friends to be here tonight, Miss Lafitte?"

"No, I didn't," Rey replied. "My friends wouldn't be... Oh dear." She glanced at Mira before looking back at

the figures in the darkness.

Mira glanced but didn't see anything. She started looking around, worry on her face. *"Those stupid dogs! They just won't leave me alone. I'm going to teach them a lesson. Where'd they go?"* At least Mira remembered the harassment she'd been suffering.

"I don't suppose you know their names?" Rey asked. She didn't want to tell Mira where they were, as confrontation with werewolves, especially if they might be Pure, would be a bad thing.

Mira shook her head. *"No. I remember they gave me a scare a few days ago. I was on the phone with someone and they followed me to the bus stop."* She furrowed her brow and bit her lower lip trying to remember more about it.

Less didn't think anyone would try attacking such a large group, though Rey did make werewolves sound like an aggressive bunch. He decided to keep quiet and tried to approach them stealthily from behind to get a look at them.

"You were talking to me," Drake said immediately. "You called me on Thursday, that was two days ago, to tell me you'd broken things off with Remy. You were walking to the bus, and the driver told you that you couldn't bring your dogs onto the bus. I told you I'd come get you if you were worried, but you told me you were on the bus to Santa Fe and were okay. I met you at the bus station and we went to my place. You spent the night."

"And I was with you at Glasshouse that night," Rey added. "You were worried about the werewolves, and that your meeting with Remy might not turn out well. But it did. We split up after that. I went to join Richard, and you stayed to finish your drink."

Mira internally searched her memory. *"I remember talking to someone. I thought it was..."* She shook her head trying to clear it. *"Rey, I remember you from a year ago, when you first arrived. I don't remember you at all,"* she told Drake. *"But can you know what happened that night?"* She gripped her head in frustration.

Less carefully took out pen and paper and wrote a message to Veridia warning her about the monsters in the woods. He held it up for the ghost that was supposed to be following him to read and pass on. It wasn't until then that he realized that the presence of Remy and his vampire followers might prevent the message from being delivered.

Swearing silently in his mind, he switched tactics to back up the ghost's attempts (or lack thereof). Gathering his control of the wind, he attempted to send a message to Rey and the others. He caused the wind on the south end of Otowi Pond to stir up and whistle through the trees. He formed it into a message, *"Whhhheeeeeerrrrrr...whoooooooffssss, whhhheeeeeerrrrrr...whoooooooffssss, Hhheeeefffiihhh...Hhheeeefffiihhh, whhhheeeeeerrrrrr...whoooooooffssss."*

Veridia turned but didn't see the werewolves Les warned of. Better safe than sorry, she suddenly burst into a swarm of dark, flittering things and swarmed off into the air.

Mira whirled looking this way and that, trying to find a source of the voice. Her anger rose. *"It's you!"* she accused Remy. *"I was warned you'd try to get into my head. You're laying a trap!"* Her warning was given as she retreated rapidly to the water and stepped onto its surface. A spark of magic let her walk on it like a legendary savior.

"No, Mira, I heard it too," Rey said calmly. "It was something on the wind, warning us about the werewolves. They're over there, at the north shore of the pond."

Mira relaxed a little. She sighed. *"Sorry. Listen, I'll admit you made me curious. I still don't know why you are"*

doing this, but some of you do seem familiar. I'll listen, but we need to level this playing field, all right?" She paused for their answer.

"Go on," Rey said.

"Follow me out onto the lake. Trust me not to let you fall or toss you to the wolves, and I'll listen." Mira turned and walked steadily across the water while water rose beneath her feet as if it was no more than slightly slippery stepping stones. She stopped twenty paces from shore, turned and waited.

"I don't know," Rey said. "Here on land, we're on a level playing field. Out there, you're holding all the cards." She switched to Glymjack Cant. "And I know how well you manipulate your element of water. Do you really not remember our friendship? The pledge we've sworn that binds us together into our motley?"

As Rey spoke, Minerva stepped forward and walked out onto the water. She had no fear of drowning, and there was something that needed to be done. The vampire held her hand out to Mira.

"You outnumber me," Mira pointed out to Rey. She made no move to go closer to shore, which meant voices had to be raised to be heard — and that carried well over the water. Mira knew that meant the werewolves, if they were still out there, would hear perfectly well unless they followed her out here.

Pleased that Minerva, at least, seemed will to trust Mira as much as they were requiring Mira to trust the others, the nymph took Minerva's hand. *"While I do not remember any such motley pledge, I do remember ours,"* she told Minerva.

Minerva took a step closer and pressed a friendly kiss to Mira's cheek. Magic coursed its way through Mira's body, sending a pleasurable little shiver through her. "Your pledge with Rey Lafitte and Less Seleman is far stronger than the one between us," she said softly. "Rey has risked her life numerous times for you, and you for her. It is a shame those memories were stolen from you by Xavier." The vampire hoped her words would have an effect on Mira. She felt there had been a connection between them before, a friendship started.

Minerva looked back over her shoulder at Drake, then turned her attention back to Mira. "I don't know who it is you think you love now, but that excitement you feel for Drake, it's real. You were beginning a new relationship with him, and you were extremely happy." She looked Mira in the eyes. "Please believe me. I have never lied to you, and I'm not now."

Everything Mira knew about knowing if someone is lying or not told her that Minerva was being honest. Her eyes flicked from Minerva to Rey. If Minerva was telling the truth, and it matched up with what Rey was saying, might they all be telling the truth? If so, then who exactly was it that had been messing with her mind. There was only one possible answer: Xavier.

"Oh no," Mira whispered. She put her hands to her face. Blood pounded in her head and it ached miserably. *"No, no, no... how can I tell what is real? Everything I know, is suspect, isn't?"* She touched the large, purplish bruise that ringed her neck and felt ill.

"Vampires can mess with minds and memories," Minerva said as Carson, Remy, and Annabeth stepped out onto the water. After a brief hesitation, Rey followed, and Drake a moment later. "You have to trust your feelings. Your emotions. When you look at Rey and the thought of her coming to harm. Of her being shot in the leg and bleeding to death, how does that make you feel?"

Mira responded immediately, wondering at her own reaction even as she said it. *"Distressed. Worried. And guilty, like I messed up somehow."* She looked puzzled. *"That seems odd to me. Why would her being shot*

make me feel guilty?"

"Because Xavier kidnapped us last night, and I was being held in order to make you behave," Rey said. "To submit to whatever it was he was going to do to your mind. I told you he was a vampire and to kill him. Becka, one of his servants, shot me in the leg. After that, you just gave up. Let him do it." She was trying to hold back her tears, and fighting the lump in her throat. "We've all been trying to hard to find you. To rescue you before we lost you completely. We all tried. Remy, myself, my sister and her friends."

"And now I really don't remember," Mira said sadly. *"I feel like everything I know is a lie."*

Amber stepped a little ways out onto the water. She said, "Marie saw you having sex with that man and woman. How could you break your promises?"

Mira looked blank. *"I only did that because... wait. What promises?"*

"The promise we made to each other," Drake said as he moved to stand within reach of Mira. "When we started dating, we made a promise. No sex for the first month of our relationship, either with each other or other people. The point was to get to know each other, to make sure what we had wasn't just the product of lust. I respect you far too much to treat you as nothing more than a sex toy."

Mira studied Drake. *"I don't know. I agreed to that, huh?"* She thought back to last night. It was all pretty hazy. She knew for a fact she'd had a lot of sex; her soreness in the morning proved it. She knew she probably did it to please Leo. Color went to her cheeks again. *"I'm sorry. I just don't remember anything like that with you, Drake. I've been seeing someone else for a while."*

"The only other person you've been seeing, Mira," Minerva said, "was Remy, and you broke that off in order to go out with Drake. Looks like Xavier took stole those memories too, and implanted something else."

"Are you sure you don't remember?" Drake asked, fighting but failing to hide his dismay and disappointment.

Mira mirrored his dismay. *"I'm sorry, but as far as I can recall, this is the first time we've met."* She had feelings for him and she had a desire to explore them, but what about Leopold? The vampire to whom... what? Mira had a horrible feeling that Xavier might have literally given her Leopold. That feeling she had around Leo, a mixture of fear and desire, was it real?

She looked at the gathered friends. *"Why is this happening? Why did Xavier brainwash me?"* She couldn't help but wonder if Leopold had simply wanted her and so he arranged it.

"Because he wanted to control you," Annabeth said, finally speaking. "In addition to your incredible beauty and your voice, your abilities are very valuable. You'd be a prize for anyone, and under a vampire's control, a very powerful weapon."

"We can walk among them," Rey said, "and they think we're normal people. Never suspecting what we can do, because they can't see through the Mask."

"You keep saying you're seeing someone," Carson said. "Who is it?"

"I can't say," Mira said with a frown. *"Dammit. He said not to and I literally cannot. Shit! How could I be so stupid?"*

"What were his exact words, Mira," Rey said.

Mira shook her head. *"I don't think he expected all of you here. Remy, of course. Maybe his coterie."* She turned to Minerva. *"Remy is right to stay well out of my reach. I can say that I've been ordered to kill him if*

he displeases me and I don't think I can stop myself if that happens. He told me to and when I look in his eyes, I can't refuse him. But I can also say that Remy is more useful to him alive than dead. Also, I think I'm going to have to return to him."

"Why?" Rey watched Mira's face.

"Two reasons. One, because I said I would. Two, because I think he's behind this. I'm going to kill him."

"Would you like some help?" Carson took a step forward. "He didn't say you had to return alone, now, did he?"

Mira showed a fox-like smile. *"No, he did not. Nor did I make any such promise. Are you sure you want to make a commitment to help me do this? What if it is someone like the Don?"*

"I can do something about that," Minerva said softly. "But there is an element of risk to it."

"About what?" Mira asked.

A little smile flickered on Minerva's lips. "Help you with recovering all your memories." Her cheeks turned a little bit pink. "I apologize. My mind wandered for a moment. But if you can remember everything that happened to you, it would make your actions more effective." She sent Remy a look, and anything he was about to say remained unsaid.

While the group continued to speak, Les followed the two werewolves (or were their three? the human might be a werewolf in humanlike form) to the edge of the water. There, they paced back and forth impatiently, but did not attempt to enter the water.

"What happens if my memories were altered, not removed? How do I know what parts that are brought out are the real ones? Especially the personal memories. They are all real to me." Mira shook her head. "I don't think I want to take the risk of losing something that makes me who I am."

"I promise you what I propose does not eliminate memories," Minerva said, "but returns what was lost. If your memories were altered, you will remember both. It will be up to you which you wish to believe is the truth." She looked at Rey, then back at Mira. "The friendship you had with Rey was more than just friendship. You were as close, if not closer, than family. Stronger than any relationship you may have had with us or any other vampire. Your lives were intertwined. Are you sure you want that taken from you forever?"

Mira looked at Rey and then back at Minerva. A part of her wanted to yell, 'Hell no!' But that was the part that was afraid her mind might further be damaged or altered at the hands of a vampire. She knew and trusted Minerva as much as she did Carson and Annabeth, though, and that made her consider the offer carefully. *"I really feel like a fool for even considering this, since I apparently just had my head screwed with."* She folded her arms and studied Minerva. *"You said there was an element of risk. What is that?"*

"The speed at which the memories come back to you can cause... problems," Minerva admitted. "If they are released in a single rush, you may develop some form of mental illness from the stress of it. If I succeed in being able to control it, they will come back slower, in a way your mind can handle without harm. There are things I can do to minimize the risk, but the decision is up to you."

"Insanity then. Permanent, I take it." She looked past Minerva toward Remy on the shore. Though she spoke of Remy, her words were for Minerva. "I remember risking my sanity for Remy before. I remember how important he was to me. He's still important, you know. I don't want to hurt him. I remember this other time I risked my sanity, Minerva. I didn't tell anyone, and it's kind of a long story. The point is I've risked my sanity more than once. I already have a lot of trouble at times knowing what is real and what isn't, especially if it's something strange. I don't know if I can afford any more mental issues." Mira turned to Rey. "If you knew me

best, then you should know. Can I afford to risk my sanity? Can I afford not to?"

"I don't think the Mizuko I knew would have had to ask that question," Rey replied softly. "If it were me, I'd do it. If I knew someone had messed with my memory maliciously, then I'd want to find out what they'd taken away. It would give me clues as to what he was up to, why he'd done it. It might help me figure out if he implanted anything else in there. I don't think I could spend the rest of my life wondering which was real and which weren't. Richard reminded me how important our memories are to our kind."

A pained expression took hold of Rey's face. "As selfish as it may sound, I don't think you can afford not to try. You've got friendships and a history, part of which have been taken from you, and you should get that back. But the decision has to be yours."

Mira had watched Rey's face carefully, then nodded. She turned back to Minerva. *"Promise me you intend me no harm?"*

"I swear it."

Mira nodded again. *"Okay then. If this works, then it looks like I'll owe you. If I'm sane enough after all this to understand that. What do we need to do?"*

"Let's go somewhere a bit more comfortable," Minerva said, glancing around. "A bit more private, and without the skulking werewolves."

"Okay. Then we can go beat up my latest boyfriend. I'd hate to let him think he got away with this," she said of the bruise.

Rey's face hardened at the mention of the bruises, but then her attention went back to the werewolves. For a moment, she considered approaching them but decided not to. Rule number two for dealing with werewolves: if they're pacing around, they're agitated about something, so keep your distance. If only she could get a better look at them. Maybe she could identify them, or be able to make a sketch to show Lyla.

She followed Mira, Minerva and the others to where Remy and Annabeth's cars were parked.

"If you have no objection," Minerva said, "we can do this in the limo."

"I object," Carson said. "Why didn't you tell them about the risks you'll face when you do this?"

"It's my decision," she replied with a firm voice. "The risks are minimal with this, and the rewards far outweigh them. Anyone who hurts a friend of mine needs to know it's unacceptable." Minerva opened the rear door of the limo and gestured for Mira to get in.

Mira looked at the coterie of vampires, catching Wilson's astonished and mystified look. She paused and asked, *"Minerva, you don't have to do this. If you might get hurt doing this, I'm not sure you should do this anyway."*

Minerva shook her head. "No, I won't get hurt. It's okay."

Mira wondered what Minerva was hiding, but knew it was something Minerva wanted to take on. Impulsively, she hugged Minerva. The vampire returned the hug without hesitation, then climbed into the back seat and waited for Mira to join her. Mira slid in after her, then waited to see what Minerva needed her to do first.

The vampire opened up a compartment and removed a shot glass, an empty hypodermic still sealed in its sterile packaging, and some surgical gauze and medical tape. "I want to make sure I have the best chance

possible to release your memories in a controlled manner. To do that, I need to gain some insight into you, and the best way for me to do that is to have a sample of your blood. That's what this is for." She indicated what she held in her lap. "Will you allow me to do so?"

"Sure," Mira said amiably. *"If it is easier to just bite me, you can do that. However you prefer is fine, though."*

Minerva blinked and searched Mira's face for a moment. "I'm surprised to hear you say that. Nevertheless, I do not use such methods with my friends, and the needle will hurt far less." With the skill and practice of a nurse, the vampire got the blood sample she needed, and Mira didn't feel a thing. She squirted it into the shot glass. After silently mouthing a few words, Minerva drank the blood.

A moment later, Mira felt a little tug, and a mild awareness of Minerva but it faded almost as quickly as it happened.

An unusual expression flitted across Minerva's face, then she took a deep breath and looked at Mira. "Now, I'm going to need to touch your face, and then I'll attempt to release your memories, the ones that represent the past year of your life." She paused. "Do you still wish to go through with this?"

Mira couldn't help but wonder what it was that Minerva experienced. She touched Minerva's arm. *"Yes. But are you okay? My blood didn't do anything... weird, did it?"*

Minerva shook her head and smiled. "No, it didn't. It was different. Unlike anything I've experienced before. But don't worry, I'm fine. No harm, no foul. Now sit back, make yourself comfortable. This should take only a moment."

Mira leaned back against the seat and tried to relax. It wasn't easy, as her mind was whirling with anticipation and wondering what all she might have been missing. She closed her eyes. When Mira was ready, Minerva touched the changeling's face. In Mira's mind, it felt like a seal broke and a gentle stream of memories flowed out, filling her senses.

Mira sighed, leaving her eyes closed for a while and she sorted out the flow of memories. Some conflicted with what she thought she knew, but others filled gaps she didn't realize were there. To her, it seemed like hours had passed, although it must have only been minutes.

In the end, she felt both whole and empty at the same time. She knew now what Xavier had done to her. She also knew what he'd done to make her feel as she did around Leopold. That didn't go away, and for all her brave talk of going back to him intent on revenge, she knew damn well how that would turn out. She felt whole because she knew who she was to her friends and what they meant to her. But she felt empty because she felt so violated by what Xavier had done. Not to mention what Leopold had her do for his own pleasure. Worse, she wasn't pleased with herself in how ready she was to do what he'd asked. He had whored her out and she let him, it was plain and simple. She'd tried to resist some things, but others, she hadn't. She'd done them because she thought she loved him. It was sick and twisted and it made her very, very angry.

She also had a good guess as to where she'd learned some things. Xavier had patterned some thoughts and memories after someone else and she recognized who it was now. Her first instinct was to recoil from everything he'd done to her. Xavier had raped her mind as thoroughly and easily as if her mind was mere clay for him to work and shape to his whim. And he'd done it all at Leopold's behest.

Mira's heart sped up as she realized all these things and her face flushed with rage. She kept her eyes closed and said through gritted teeth, *"God damn them. If I take you guys back there, he'll use me against you. I don't know how to stop that from happening."*

"Did you ingest any of his blood?" Minerva asked.

Mira shook her head slowly. "No."

Minerva nodded. "That makes some things easier. Can you tell us what he did, and where you were taken?"

"I can take you there. As for what he did, I don't know. I just feel... wobbly around him. It's like I can't bear it when he's upset with me. And if he looks at me with those eyes, I know I'll do anything for him. I thought that was love, but now I know it isn't. It's some kind of mind-fucked, twisted thing that Xavier made me believe. I hate it, but I also can't change it," Mira concluded miserably. *"I want to punish them for what they did. I think that's the only way I'm going to get over this, but I don't really know how I'm going to do that."*

"Would killing Xavier cause a lot of trouble?" Drake asked, hoping the answer would be no.

"It depends," Remy replied, "on how it's done. He is well regarded in certain circles." He looked at Mira. "It's up to you, Mira. What do you want done?"

"Xavier did this to me, but he isn't the one in charge. I'm pretty sure he was just working for — ungh!" Mira choked on the name. *"Can't say who. Killing Xavier would be really swell, but sadly the person who's behind this could probably either just hire someone else to do this sort of thing, or maybe do it himself. He's who we really have to get."*

"Is it someone we know?" Carson asked.

"I can't seem to even give you something that would directly tell you who it is by inference. But hey let's talk about something else for a moment. Carson, do you remember that one time when you gave a group of pissed off werewolves an address and they went and killed s-someone? Guess what. They killed someone other than you thought they did." Mira added a bitter, *"Surprise."*

The entire coterie stilled, not even taking so much as a breath for a long moment. "That information is rather unpleasant," Remy said. That seemed to be the cue for the others to move once more.

Annabeth and Wilson flipped open their phones, giving rapid orders to those who answered their calls. Carson growled, and Minerva put a placating hand on his shoulder.

"What are you talking about?" Rey asked.

"Remy and I uncovered a plot that would do to you pretty much what happened to me," Mira told her. *"So we took care of it. Maybe the wrong person got killed, but the end result was that you were left alone. Mission accomplished. If you want to know more, you better ask Remy or I might turn into a mute or worse."*

Rey didn't quite know what to say as she absorbed that information, and then her eyes fell on Amber. "Amber, we need to get you somewhere safe before more trouble starts."

Amber frowned. "Miz, you remember me now, don't you?"

"Mira," she corrected her friend. *"And I've never forgotten you."*

Amber brightened and smiled. "Okay. Well, these guys like sifted through your brain, right? So they know where you live and all that."

Mira nodded. *"It's safest to assume everything there is to know about me, they probably know, too."*

"Uh huh," Amber said. "Okay, so this guy can pretty much find you anywhere you might think to go, except maybe the otherworld place, where I can't go and hide out anyway. So really, the safest place for me to be is right here with you and all our friends." Amber looked a little self-satisfied when she turned her face toward Rey.

"Hey," Mira said, getting Amber's attention. "No you don't. I'm not risking you. You're no good in a fight. I hate to say it, but I need you to just disappear onto the streets for a while. You are the one thing that hasn't seemed to change on me overnight. You're important to me, but I just can't worry about keeping your ass out of the fire right now."

Amber stared at Mira, challenging her friend, but Mira didn't relent. "Well fuck, I hate to slow you down," she said angrily. "I guess I'll see you around."

Rey bit back a comment, setting aside her impulse to try and smooth things over between Mira and her friend. This was something they had to work out on their own.

"That's not what she means and you know it." Carson stepped forward. "You've got no way to protect yourself, and you'd end up being more a liability than a help. If Mira has to concentrate on keeping you safe, then that puts her at risk too." He looked her up and down. "You'd be a distraction she can't afford."

"Yeah, yeah, I get it. I'm going." Amber turned on her heel and began to stalk away.

"Amber," Minerva said, taking a step forward. "I won't be participating in the fight, but that doesn't mean I won't be helping. I'd really appreciate it if you'd help me."

Unsure why Minerva would care, Amber was cautious. She stopped and turned back. "Really?"

"Yes." The vampire lowered her voice as if confiding a secret. "I couldn't fight my way out of a torn, wet paper bag. So, I do my part in other ways. Normally, I've got a bit more time to get ready, but since I suspect some action will take place tonight, I will need your assistance to make sure everything goes as planned."

"I'd like to help you, then. *Some* people forget that if I hadn't been there to get help, they'd have bled to death last summer."

Mira's sigh accompanied a pained expression. She hadn't been completely sure if that had happened or not. Figuring she'd insulted Amber enough for one day, she let it go. She addressed the group. "*I can show whoever wants to with where we need to go. When will you be ready?*"

"Where's Less gotten to?" Rey asked as she looked around.

Mira pursed her lips. "*The Winter King? I don't know.*" It took a moment to sort out her memories of him. She had come to him for advice in the past, looking for advice. She realized he was a father figure to her. "*Is he really a motley mate? I'm not sure if he really is, or that just wanted him to be.*"

Amber piped up. "He is, Miz-- Mira. I think he might have been the one to send that message about werewolves."

"*So he is probably tracking them.*" That idea worried Mira. "*Less really takes some risks. I hope he's all right.*"

"Not much we can do," Rey replied. "I just hope he doesn't actually approach them. Given their mood, they're likely to bite first and not bother to ask questions later." She looked to where she had last seen the werewolves. They'd more or less stayed where they were, and hadn't come any closer. They were outnumbered, and wouldn't take on a group larger than them. But what did they want, and who were they?

Too far away to get a picture with her phone. She'd try to come back later and check where they were. It was unlikely she'd find anything, but she'd need to try.

"We'll be ready to go in a moment," Remy replied. He reached into the limo and flipped a hidden catch under the bank of seats that faced the rear of the car. He reached in and withdrew a long, narrow, silk-wrapped bundle tied with scarlet cords. With a few tugs, the silk fell away to reveal a dark mahogany cane with an ornate handle.

Drake inhaled sharply. "Is that a de Guerre blade?"

Remy glanced at Drake in surprise. "Not many people are familiar with his work."

"Blades of all kinds are a passion of mine," Drake replied. "I have a replica of Querida."

The corners of Remy's mouth twitched. "We should talk about this some other time. Now, we must go after an enemy." He looked at Mira. "Minerva will have to follow and meet us there. Can you tell us the nearest intersection to where he took you?"

Mira told him, then turned toward Drake. "*Drake? I remember now.*" She felt guilty and she wondered how much more of her strange, up and down life he'd take before he gave up on her. She felt like apologizing. "*May I ride with you?*"

"Sure." He offered her his hand.

Mira took it with a wide smile.

The group split up into their cars and headed away from the park.

The ride to the intersection offered Mira and Drake plenty of time to talk, which was just what Mira was hoping for. After a couple minutes she turned in her seat. "*I am the worst date ever,*" Mira said. "*Are you sure you want to have anything at all to do with me? I am obviously major trouble and if you don't want to be within ten feet of me after this, I wouldn't blame you. Hell, I'm not sure I want to be within ten feet of me. It's clearly not outside the typical blast radius.*"

Drake chuckled. "Are you trying to scare me off?"

"*No. Well, I guess in a way.*" Mira shook her head. Trying to get along in this world was confusing enough without all the head games that Leopold had just played with her. Worse, she was still terrified she'd go all wobbly once she came face to face with him. She didn't want that, not in front of her friends, but at the same time she knew she had to face him or never get past this. "*I guess I'm just not used to the idea someone would want to be around me for any reason other than my looks. It's dangerous to be around me.*"

"So is being in the same room as a hungry tiger. I won't give up without at least trying." Drake looked at Mira. "I swear your voice is more distracting than getting a blowjob while I'm driving." A quick glance revealed the effect she was having on him. "Could we continue this conversation later?"

Mira smiled wickedly and pressed the release on her seatbelt. She slid out of her belt. "*A blowjob is less distracting you say? It's a good thing you don't mind being in the same room as a tiger because this tigress is hungry.*" She whispered into his ear while one hand worked the top button of his pant free. "*Do you have any idea how sexy you are? How much I've wanted you from the moment I set eyes on you?*"

"*I know you want me, too. There is no compliment more honest than this.*" She gripped his member through his pants and gave him an affectionate squeeze. "*Let me take care of this for you. I'll shut up, and you'll be able to concentrate later.*" She pulled down his zipper with a quick jerk of her wrist.

"You're making it very difficult to say no." Drake's mouth was suddenly dry. The relief of the pressure of his pants was quickly replaced by the tenting of his bikini briefs. The stretchy black fabric could barely contain his erection. He shifted his hips in an unconscious invitation as he tried to get comfortable and maintain some level of control.

"*Why on earth would you say no?*" But the question was rhetorical. She found the opening in his shorts and freed his stiffened rod from its confines. She took a moment to appreciate him. She looked in wonder for a moment; even his penis was handsome. Her gasp was a compliment on his size and her blush was born of her thoughts of him. She had her lips wrapped tightly around him as she sucked and used her tongue to tickle his tip. She worked with him, vigorously at times and at other times, with teasing gentleness. Soft, wordless sounds she made let him know she enjoyed the taste of him. He surprised her when he finally exploded into her mouth but she gulped him down, licking him to catch every stray drip.

When she was done, she didn't put him away. After all, she wouldn't be able to see him if she did that, and she liked the view. She hid her mouth behind a hand as she checked to be sure she was clean.

Drake's face was covered with a fine sheen of sweat as he pulled over to the side of the road. Putting the car into park, he pulled Mira close and kissed her, thrusting his tongue between her lips at the first opportunity he had. He took his time, tasting both himself and her in her mouth. When he finally withdrew, a deeply satisfied smile covered his face. "Later," he said, his voice deep and rough, "I will return the favor." He settled back into his seat and with a few deft movements of his own, returned his almost rejuvenated sex into behind the zipper of his jeans.

Mira nestled against his shoulder. To hell with the cops if they wanted to stop them because she wasn't wearing a seatbelt. It was this feeling in her heart that she knew was, above all, real. Whatever vampires might do to her head, they couldn't make her feel like this. A happy smile drew her lips and, true to her word, she was quiet for the few minutes that was all that remained of their drive.

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The group met near the intersection Mira described and collected themselves into a group again.

"How do we want to do this?" Rey asked. "Are we going for kill or capture?"

Mira said with a hot edge to her voice, "*Capturing isn't very cathartic to me. I vote for the killings. Two or three times over, if possible.*"

"Capturing him would make him far more useful," Remy said. "You're likely not the first person he's done this too. Without him to tell us, there's no way of knowing." There were also many other things he wanted to know about Leopold, but that was not something to be discussed at this point.

"*Some people are just too dangerous to keep alive,*" Mira told him. "*Once he realizes I'm not his little plaything anymore, he's going to wonder how that happened. He'll figure out you or someone you know have a way to break even Xavier's brainwashing and next time he'll do it so no one can tell so easily. You can't keep someone who can brainwash your guards.*"

"Remy never said we wouldn't kill him," Carson interjected. "Just get what we want from him first."

Mira looked at them and considered. "*Well. You did save me from him.*" She referred especially to Remy and Minerva, but she wasn't excluding anyone. It meant a lot to her that every friend she had in the world had shown up to help. "*Okay. No premature cremation. What about anyone else? Servants, lackeys, whatever he may have? Capture everyone we can?*"

"I think so," Rey replied with a nod, "though you may want to hold off on the Human Torch thing. Vampires don't react too well to fire." She looked to Remy for confirmation, and he gave her a slight nod.

"It can cause us to enter a berserker-like state, and that would be bad," Remy added.

"Yeah, I was told about that," Mira said. "I would never use fire in such a way to cause anyone harm. Don't worry."

A slight frown of concern marred Rey's expression. "He knows everything you can do. What about Drake and I? Do they know what you know about our capabilities?"

"They... got a lot of details direct from my memories. If they had time to go through everything Xavier dictated to Ellie, then they do." Mira looked at her feet. She knew it was her fault, that she could help that they stole memories and sifted through her mind. But it still felt like she'd cracked and told everyone's secrets without a fight at all. God damn mind-rapers.

"Best to assume they know everything, then." Rey thought about what abilities she'd used in Mira's presence, and those she'd told her friend she could do. The only things that might be a surprise would be things she'd gotten very recently and hadn't discussed with anyone yet.

Mira nodded, then looked around at her assembled allies. "We better get going before I lose my nerve, then. I'll head up to the house and the stop to wait for all of you. You can decide who will go in the front or the back, or wherever else."

—

After Less saw the others first head to the parking lot and then head away from the park, the werewolves changed their posture. First, the two big beasts shifted smoothly back into human form and pulled on sweats. They debated amongst each other for a while but a 'fortuitous' breeze brought their words to Less enough that he could catch the gist of the debate as well as a few other tidbits. Mastery over elements such as fire might enable the fae to do flashy things like toss fireballs, but the more subtle element of Air proved its utility to a spymaster as a whisper could literally be carried upon the wind.

Less was able to pick up the consensus the three werewolves reached. One would remain here in case the 'Oracle' returned. This 'Oracle', they referred to was clearly Mira since that was the changeling they appeared to be following around. A fourth member of their pack would join the other two. Meanwhile the other two would head to Santa Fe in hopes of catching her there. This was the crux of their debate — apparently they had concerns about 'territory' and getting caught outside their own. Clearly Santa Fe was not their territory. They thought it might be unclaimed, but it was apparently close enough to whatever enemies they had there that it made them cautious. However, they ultimately agreed that this Oracle was too important to them not to take a few risks.

The one who had remained in human form and had the various piercings, was named John. The other two were called Stokes and Bear. Bear was the one who would remain here and the one that wasn't present but would join John and Stokes was someone named Josef, pronounced as if the 'J' was a 'Y'.

Having decided their course, the three of them all turned into wolves. This time, they didn't use the intimidatingly huge monstrous form, but instead looked rather like timber wolves, or tall german shepherds. Built for long-distance running and covert movement, the wolves parted company.

Oracle? thought Less. *Somehow they've caught wind of Mizu- Mira's recent contract. That is certainly a leak I need to stop. What do they want to know about their fates?* He quietly crept out of the park and headed to where he could access the Trod to Santa Fe. When he thought he was far enough out of earshot of the werewolf's hearing, he called Rey to let her know what was up.

"So there's more to it than just wanting a dance," Rey replied thoughtfully. "I appreciate you letting me know. I'll make some calls when we're finished dealing with our problem tonight." She told Less where the group was headed. "You going to join us?"

"No. I'm going to gather Septimus and Worm and head to Santa Fe to find out how they found out about the *Oracle* and what they want to know."

"How are you going to do that?" Rey asked. "I don't think they'll just up and tell you anything. If you're thinking to bargain with them, there's a good chance it might not work. I don't know if you have anything they'd want."

"I'll just use my feminine wiles," joked Less. He had a plan but didn't have the time to relate the details. "I'll be at Mira's apartment. Where are you headed in case I need to find you?"

Rey repeated the information about the intersection Mira had given them. "After that, I don't know where I'll be, and I'll be putting my phone on silent mode. Don't want to give our presence away any more than we have to."

Mira walked up the street alone. She couldn't tell them which house it was so letting them follow her seemed the only solution. The others hung back until they saw her stop in front of a gate. The front yard of the property was surrounded by a mainly decorative wrought-iron fence that was about four feet high. It gave the old Victorian a stately look without making it obviously antisocial. It mainly was for appearances and perhaps to reduce trespass by rabbits. The house itself avoided the standard white and dove into a charming pairing of rust-red and flat green that worked well together. Mira didn't touch the gate, but just waited for her allies to get into position.

Remy and Carson spotted the back alley drive. The house had a side door that led direction to an unattached garage and that alley. Thanks to the garage and no obvious cameras on the premises, it was a perfect way to sneak up to the back door without being seen.

Meanwhile, Drake and Rey hopped the iron fence and hid next to a stand of rose bushes. They watched while Mira calmly opened the gate and walked up stone paved walk to the porch. Three little steps took her to up to the enclosed porch. It was just a scree door there and it latched but wasn't locked. She went inside and stopped at the front door while she gathered her nerve again. She tried the handle but it didn't open. She peered through the glass, then rang the doorbell.

After a moment, Drake and Rey saw the door open. From their vantage point they could just make out a portly, grey-haired elderly woman through the wire porch screens.

"Hello? Can I help you?" she asked.

Mira was astonished and stared back at her in surprise. The old lady was joined by an old man not much taller than she, and a bit thinner. "Oh, it's you!" he said with a pleasant smile. "Anna, you remember the young lady we found last night? She was lost and confused. She spent the night in the guest room?"

Anna blinked slowly and then turned her face back to Mira. "Oh. Yes, that's right."

This was all wrong, Mira thought madly. What was going on? Where was Leopold? She started to

hyperventilate. She didn't know if she could take more mind games. She blinked back tears of frustration and anger while she signaled to Rey and Drake with one hand she held behind her back.

"Oh dear, I believe she's gotten confused again, Henry. I told you we should have called health services last night." She took Mira's hand and patted it. "Now it will be all right, dear. You just come inside and Henry will call for some help, okay?"

Numbly, Mira let them lead her inside to the living room, where she sat down heavily on the couch. He wasn't here, her mind told her dully. Somehow he'd covered his trail. Or maybe they'd left her completely insane and everything that had happened that afternoon had been nothing more than a hallucination.

Rey was up the steps the instant Mira gave the signal, with Drake half a heartbeat behind her as she called upon the contracts of Vainglory. "This is great, Mira. You found your way back." She gave the elderly couple a broad, friendly smile. "I was hoping she would, so I could personally express my appreciation for what was done for my friend last night." She'd noticed how slowly the old woman had reacted to what the man said, and wondered if these were more of Leopold's - or perhaps Xavier's- slaves.

Mira shot Rey a grateful smile. Her friend's veiled hostility helped reassure her that this was in fact happening. She also sensed a flicker of magic as from Rey, and in a moment it became clear what she did.

Henry blinked and his left hand began shaking uncontrollably, a characteristic of Parkinson's disease. He gripped it with his right hand while he looked at the floor and stammered, "Ah! Miss Becka. So nice to see you. Please let me assure you that your friend was provided only the best of care..."

"I'm glad to hear that," Rey replied, her tone now modeled what she remembered of Becka's speech. "I've come to collect Mira's things, as well as everything else. Time to clear up loose ends."

"Oh my," Anna said. She was struggling to open the lid of the heavy but short coffee table. "Give me a hand dear?" she asked of Mira. Mira opened it and Anna pulled out a shotgun and leveled it at Rey.

"Henry! This isn't Miss Becka. They are playing with your head, you weak-minded fool!" She thrust her chin defiantly toward Rey and the handsome Drake behind her. "Make any move but out of my house and I'll blow your head off!" she cackled.

"I came for my friend," Rey's voice was calm. "And to speak with Leopold. If he's not here, then my friends and I will leave."

Behind Rey, Drake shifted to her right so he had a clean path to the woman. Behind his back he slipped his sword-token from its hidden spot up his sleeve into his hand, ready to move. His coat was armored and could take the blunt of the blast of that shotgun if need be. The duelist prepared to move, to take down the woman. Given the choice between losing Rey and losing himself, the loss of Rey would harm Mira more.

Mira stood and moved to stand next to Drake. She took his hand in a show of solidarity. "*Ma'am, please. These aren't enemies.*" She pulled at Drake's hand to urge him to take Rey and withdraw while the spell of her voice distracted the old woman. It was working — the end of the double-barreled shotgun wobbled around enough while she spoke it wasn't a sure thing she could hit someone even at point blank range. "*I'm sorry for my friend's trick, but she had only the best of intentions. We are just going to leave you alone now, okay? Just stay calm and we'll be out of your house.*" She rambled on with further relatively meaningless placations in order to keep their attention riveted and ability to do anything rash (successfully) to a minimum.

Rey took the opportunity to back away, never taking her eyes off Anna or the old man. Drake moved as well, but stayed a half step in front of Rey, ready to move should things go bad.

Mira backed away while she spoke, as well. She stopped when she got to the door. She heard Rey and Drake open the door and step onto the porch. *"Before I go, Anna, may I make one small request?"*

Anna had followed to the door, closely followed by Henry. She waved the shotgun at Mira. *"Of course, dear."*

"I got a bunch of new clothes today and put them in my room. May I have them?"

Anna blinked, then pointed the shotgun at the ceiling while she rested the butt on her hip. After a moment's thought, she said, *"Of course dear. You wait right here and I'll bring them right out to you."* She handed the gun off to Henry and headed off.

Mira tried her best not to duck as the Parkinson's-stricken older man waved the deadly thing all over the place.

Drake remained where he was, his body tense. He hated guns. No finesse. No style. Any thug or old woman could use them to kill. There was no reward, no challenge, in that.

Rey was nervous for a different reason. Was the woman really going for the clothes, or was she going to make a phone call?

She didn't have to wait long to find out. A few minutes later, while Mira talked to Henry about how she looked forward to warmer weather, Anna reappeared with a stack of clothes, shoes, and some items of jewelry. She put them carefully into a paper bag, then brought them over to the door.

"Oh really, Henry. You'll put an eye out with that thing," she scolded her husband. *"Point it at the floor."*

"I know," he mumbled in annoyance. But he lowered the shotgun while his wife walked in front of him and passed Mira the bag. Anna gave Mira a hug and told her, *"You take care now. If you come back with your friends, we'll have to shootcha next time. Come back alone and I'll set out some cookies, okay?"*

"Um. Right. Thanks for giving me my things. Good night Anna. Henry."

"Nightynight dear," Henry piped up. Then Anna closed the door.

After they left the porch, Mira let out a relieved breath and said, *"Well, I guess it could be worse. I could be like them."*

"It could," Rey replied with a nod.

"But it's not." Drake closed the distance between them and put a supportive hand on her shoulder. A moment later, Remy and Carson stepped out of the alley, the latter carrying what appeared to be a trash bag.

"An excellent distraction," Remy said. *"We found a number of documents in the trash, some shredded, some not. Our people will recover what's there, and I'll make sure you get a copy of everything."*

Mira wrinkled her nose at the dumpster-divers. *"I appreciate that,"* she said, thinking that copies would smell much nicer than the soggy remains they pulled from the garbage. *"Okay. Well I guess we've done all we can for the tonight. Hey Rey, where's Less? I haven't seen him since early tonight."*

"Turns out those werewolves were after you, calling you the Oracle," Rey quickly signed. *"He called and let me know about it, and that he was going to try and find out who told them about your prophetic abilities. When I told him it was unlikely they'd just tell him, he said he was going to use his 'feminine wiles'. I hope he didn't do anything stupid. When werewolves get angry, then can get violent."*

That got Mira worried. She pulled out her cell phone and stared at it. *"Damn. I think Leopold got me this."* She tossed to Remy to be analyzed along with the rest of the trash. *"Mind giving him a call, Rey? Those guys are really dangerous. I've played cat and mouse with them a lot lately and I really don't think Less knows what he's getting into. And them calling me an oracle is a problem. I don't know how they got that kind of information."*

"Right now, how they found out isn't that important." Rey speed dialed Less' number. "They likely want to have access to you for your abilities. We need to find out who they are, and why. I've got to get a hold of Lyla after we find Less."

—

After getting off the phone with Rey, Less jotted down the address where she and Mira were headed to with the vampires. Then he dialled Septimus and Worm for backup. He would have liked to have Clare's quiet competence beside him, but he didn't want to compromise her cover. In order to get the Wardens to drop everything and meet him right away at the Trod to Santa Fe, he told Septimus the mission involved werewolves and he told Worm it involved breaking and entering.

It wasn't long before the trio were exiting the Hargrave Gate. Worm gave her Constable a dark, knowing smile and nod before disappearing into the night. Septimus and Less strolled slowly along the sidewalk to the apartment building's lobby entrance. They kept a sharp eye out for evidence that the werewolves had somehow beat them here, though Less was sure they were still loping through the desert next to the highway.

Seeing nothing, the pair gave their names at security and requested access to Mizuko's apartment. When the guard called up, Worm was there waiting to give her approval.

Inside Mizuko and Amber's apartment, he briefed the Wardens again. "Remember, we're expecting John, Joseph and Stokes. Assume all three are powerful werewolves and are very dangerous. They are coming here to seek Mira (he had already briefed them on Mizuko's name change during their dash along the Trod.) as an Oracle. Their desire for answers should let us get what we want without violence. I will play the part of the Oracle and you two will be her retainers. These are supernaturals, so feel free to play up the mysticism by letting your Masks slip."

With that, Less went up to Mira's room and rummaged through her wardrobe. Deciding to avoid the torturous bondage of her underwear drawer, he selected a flowing, diaphanous dress and several similar scarves. As he slid into the clothes, the catch in the Contract of Mirror allowed his skin to flow into Mizuko's curves. As he adjusted a silk scarf over his head to shade his face, it shifted into Mizuko's Asian features and her hair fell down over his shoulders. He gave himself a wink in the mirror and settled in to wait.

They didn't have long to wait. Minutes later, there was a crunching sound coming from the outside walls. A moment later, three huge shapes dropped onto the balcony. They loomed large, blotting out the city lights behind them, then suddenly they were just three men. One of them held up a finger and tapped on the glass of the balcony's sliding door.

Worm unlatched the door and slid it open. "John, I presume?" she said, gesturing to the couch. "You and your friends were expected."

Septimus ducked into the kitchen and brought out the three bottles of beer he had scrounged from the fridge. "Mira said you would come seeking her."

Josef and Stokes glanced at each other while John answered. "Mira, is it. And who are you?" He watched the big man through suspiciously narrowed eyes.

Worm was about to clear up the misunderstanding when Less appeared at the top of the stairs. He was

darkly radiant in Mira's body. "I am Mira," he said in a feminine whisper. "These are my attendants, Veridia and Richard." He held the scarves around him like a shawl as he took a few steps down and leaned on the railing. The sheer material clung to his skin in a pleasing way. He was barefoot, having decided not to attempt the folly of the heels he had found. The scent of Mira's perfume emanated from her. A tangy smell, like ocean air. "How did you know to come here?" he asked.

Joseph sniffed the air and traded another look at Stokes while their leader evaluated this unexpected turn of events. John grinned wolfishly. "You haven't kept it a secret, have you." He ignored the attendants (Stokes and Joseph were keeping an eye on them) and began climbing the circular staircase. "I was hoping we could let what happened between us in the past go."

Less watched John approach but held his ground. He looked down and met the savage eyes. "I do not see why I should let it go. I have not advertised my visions. Where did you hear about them?"

John continued up the stairs. "Who said anything about visions?"

"Stay right there, John!" warned Less, pointing at him. He grabbed control of the air in the room and caused it to blow around him, rustling Mira's hair and scarves in an ominous way. "You'll not get anything you want by angering me. Why are you here?"

John paused a moment, then smiled and continued. "Simple. I know what you are. You know what we are. Now I would like to negotiate for your services." He stopped at the top of the stairs directly in front of Less, hands inoffensively stuffed in the pockets of his jacket.

Septimus tried to ease the atmosphere in the room. "Come on, guys, ease up. Sit down and have a beer."

"Part of the price of my services is to answer my questions and not to be harmed by your kind," said Less.

John stared at her. "You know what I think?" He pulled a slapjack out of his pocket and slammed it into Less's skull. As his vision began to rapidly narrow and blackness envelop him, John's voice continued to echo in his ears. "I think an oracle wouldn't need to ask questions. I also think there's something wrong with your voice." WHAM! went another strike into his spine as Less doubled over in pain. Yells and thuds echoed up from the apartment below. "To tell you the truth, I'm beginning to feel like you aren't the person you seem to be. If I'm wrong, I'll apologize later."

The last thing Less heard was, "Tell Mira something for me, if you don't mind. Tell her I don't like being played for a fool."

—

The next sound that pierced Less's senses was the insistent chirping of his cell phone. As he blinked awake, he found himself back in his usual form (though still dressed in Mira's clothes) and lying on the floor at the top of the stairs. His head felt like it was split open and his back and ribs were sore as hell. But he was alive. He could here a moan and some shuffling around downstairs.

Less slowly sat up and touched the back of his head experimentally. He wished he hadn't as the pain exploded all over again. He forced himself to drag his battered body into Mira's bedroom where he had left his phone. He wanted to check on his fellow Wardens but the thought of shouting down to them wasn't a welcome one. "Yeah?" he croaked into the phone.

"You at Mira's?" Rey asked. Any "I told you so" comments would be better made in person.

"Uh huh," he managed. "Werewolves are gone."

"Stay where you are. We're on our way." Rey slipped her phone into her pocket.

"Can you keep Amber occupied and safe for a while longer?" the Fairest asked Remy and Carson. They replied with a nod, then she turned her attention back to Mira. "Less is hurt. Let's go."

Mira and Drake followed Rey back to the apartment. It was a good twenty minutes from north Mythic to Santa Fe and that gave Less some time to assess the damage.

The world stopped it's crazy spinning enough to let him change clothes and then make it down the stairs without falling, though his stomach was still churning from nausea. Septimus was just stirring when he got to the bottom of the stairs and Worm was already leaning on the kitchen counter.

The place was a wreck. The heavy dining room table looked to have been used as a bludgeon and it now sported two broken legs. It was also smashed in half. Two chairs were likewise destroyed and the couch had apparently been thrown at someone. It now sat tipped over and it was covered in glass from the shattered big screen TV. In fact, there were few identifiable pieces of furniture still intact. The guilty party for this deed, hefted himself up on his elbows and looked up at Less.

"My apologies, sir. I hit them as hard as I could, but they just kept getting up," Septimus stated.

"You did your best," said Less as he opened the freezer to get out some ice cubes for the bruises. "I slipped up by talking. Rookie mistake."

A short while later, Mira, Rey and Drake arrived. The door opened without warning as Mira used her keyless entry.

Mira was speechless as she stood looking at the three Wardens and the ruins of her apartment. Caught between concern for Less and what had happened to her apartment, which had only just been repaired within days, she didn't know what to say first.

Rey walked into the apartment and took a quick look around. From her expression, it was obvious she wasn't surprised at the condition of the apartment or of the people in it. "Less," she said without preamble, "the next time you want to deal with werewolves let me do it. It would have saved you a beating and the damage to Mira and Amber's apartment. I know werewolves. In fact, it's the reason I was invited to join the Lord Sages of the Unknown Reaches in the first place." She shook her head. "I warned you not to mess with the werewolves." Rey took a certain measure of satisfaction in saying 'I told you so' to him.

"Oh, fuck you, Rey." Less was in no mood for her lip. "There was a window and I took it. I was hoping to get them to come back at a time of our choosing. My plan would have worked if they weren't such mental midgets that they don't know how Oracle's work. It was pretty clear they had no intention of doing anything but wrecking the place, anyway. Did you get the guy who messed with Mira's head?"

Mira decided right then what was most important to her right now. She stepped between them and took hold of Less's arms. She looked into his eyes so he knew that every word she said, she meant. "*You risked your life for me? Not just your life but your your friends risked theirs too and even the stability of the new Winter Court?*" She teared up and hugged him tight. "*My god, Less. Thank you.*"

Less gasped in pain from the tight squeeze on his cracked ribs. "Anything for you, Mira," he said. "Though, I really needed to find out how they found out about your recent Contract."

She clutched him tight for a long minute before she let up. Then she wiped her cheeks with her hand and showed him a smile. "*Leo had anticipated our move. He was long gone, but maybe Remy will find something from the papers he recovered.*"

"Anything he finds will be our only lead as to what he's up to and where he might be hiding," Rey added. Her amusement at Less actually swearing at her had faded quickly. "Until then, there are other avenues we can use to see about stopping those werewolves who want Mira." She paused and thought for a moment. "I can make some phone calls, see what I can find. I'll try to set up some meetings tomorrow morning with friends of mine who can help. I'd like you to come along, Less, if you feel up to it."

Less groaned inwardly at the thought of tomorrow morning, but he nodded his agreement.

Mira added, *"I need to get this place warded."* She looked around at the damage again.

Septimus cleared his throat. "Um. Actually, most of this is my fault. The werewolves attacked and I picked up whatever was at hand and hit them with it. I'm afraid I was the one that broke your furniture." He stared at his feet, hunched, and looked both glum and apologetic.

Mira said, *"Don't worry about it. I know you were just trying to protect me from them."*

Worm asked, "What do you mean by getting this place warded? Like a reinforced steel door?"

Mira looked thoughtful. *"Good idea. I'll ask Remy about that. But no, what I meant by a ward is something I've run across in my studies in sorcery. As supernatural beings, we have certain defenses built in. But they don't extend to others, and with few exceptions, neither does it extend to our homes. Mortals, however, are not bound by the same rules that bind all other supernatural beings. And the most clever ones have learned their own form of magic and devised ways to protect themselves from supernatural beings. Wards are among the powers that witches are reputed to possess."*

"So," Worm concluded as she caught on, "you're going to offer a faerie bargain to a witch in exchange for her coming over and warding your home?"

Mira nodded, smiling. "Yep."

"At least witches don't respond to faerie bargains like werewolves do," muttered Less.

Rey decided discretion was the better part of valor and said nothing about Less' comment. "Mira, do you remember if you've got any healing goblin fruit?"

"Yes, of course. Let me find them for you." She went to the fridge and dug around, then came up with four leaf-shaped fruit which she gave to Less to divide among them.

Worm declined the fruit saying she wasn't hurt that bad; she'd faked unconsciousness in hopes she might be able to save a life later. After Septimus and Less applied the leaves to the most painful injuries, they were feeling substantially improved. The pain went away, cracked ribs mended and aching skulls ached less.

Satisfied the men were feeling better, Mira asked Drake, *"May I beg another ride from you? If I'm going to use this apartment anymore I need to get a ward up. To do that I need to get across town and contact some witches."* She winked at him and promised, *"And I'll be quiet when you are trying to drive. If you want me to be."*

Drake chuckled. "Let's go."

Rey watched Mira and Drake talk. The flirting with Drake was new. Mizuko had never been subtle, or really

ever acted that way, not that Rey ever remembered seeing. Was this something Leopold had Xavier change in her? If so, to what end? But the adrenaline from the stress of the past 24 hours had begun to fade and she was tired. She would look into it later. She turned to looked at at Less, Septimus and Worm. "Can I drop you guys off somewhere?"

"If you're going back to Mythic City, that would be great."

Rey nodded. "Just let me know where and I'll get you there."

"Home."

The group disbanded and headed each their own directions. While Rey dropped off Less and his Wardens, Drake drove Mira.

"Where did you want to go?" Drake asked as he started his car.

"I don't want to show up at a witch's doorstep in the middle of the night, so I thought I'd go to their usual meeting place." She didn't expect to know what or where the Blood Tears club was, so she gave him the address. *"I think there is a back entrance. We can try knocking there first and if they recognize me, it'll be easier to go straight to the people I need to see rather than thread our way through the sex club."*

"A sex club, huh. I need to make a stop first."

Mira was curious but kept quiet until they arrived at their destination.

It took a moment for Mira to recognize Drake's place when they pulled into the driveway.

"Have you got a witch hidden in your apartment?" she asked with a smile.

"No, but I do have some things there that you might be able to use."

Mira looked at him, puzzled.

Drake's grin widened. "Come inside and I'll show you." He climbed out of his seat and strode around the front of the car to open her door for her.

She got out and stood up. *"My arm's not broken you know."* She told him, but she had a little smile. Her pride made her want people to think she was strong, but she liked being pampered a little.

"I know. My mother just raised a gentleman, that's all." Drake walked with Mira up the walkway and opened the door. "Kitchen's straight down the hall. I'll join you in a couple of seconds."

Mira wandered down the hall, looking at the wall decor as she went until she finally took a seat on a stool at a bar that was located just at the kitchen. She'd just mad herself comfortable when Drake walked in. He'd removed his coat to reveal the tight black knit shirt he'd worn beneath it. It clung to him, showing off his warrior's build.

Her eyes ran over his body with open appreciation as a thrill of desire made her heart beat faster.

He moved to stand in front of her and simply let his eyes drink her in. "You look really good, Mira." He raised his eyes to meet hers. "Really good."

She draped her arms around his shoulders. *"Oh yeah? What do you like best about me?"*

"That's a kind of question I think might get me in trouble no matter what answer I give." With a gentle nudge with his leg, he slid between her knees. "Right now, I'm interested in this part." Drake leaned in to kiss her.

Her lips were soft, warm, and ready to accept him. She let her thoughts dissolve in the heat of the moment as the fire of her passion for him flare inside her. She pulled back before she let it go on too long and her mind clicked into action again. "Drake," she said softly, *"you don't have to. What I did in the car I did because I wanted to. I didn't expect anything in return, and I still don't."*

His reply was to kiss her again and pull her just close enough that their chests were barely touching. She hooked her legs around his thighs and looked back at him with smoldering eyes that tempted and dared him to take more.

Drake smiled and loosened the hold she had on him. Before she could complain, he scooped her up in his arms and carried her upstairs. Mira never went out again to look for witches that night, but she was more than happy with the distraction that continued until she was too exhausted to consider anything but sleep.

—

It was with a sigh of relief that Rey leaned back against her front door after she locked it. Less was back home, and she'd dropped the other Wardens off at their requested locations. Her night, however, wasn't over yet. She needed to find out everything she could about those werewolves.

Her first instinct was to call Lyla, but she knew that at the last time they'd talked about it, Lyla knew very little about the packs in Mythic. But Rey knew who did, and she dialed the number as she headed for the living room.

Chase answered the phone after a few rings. He spoke softly. "Hi Rey. Been a while."

"It has been. My fault, and nothing but excuses to explain it." Rey could almost picture the expression on his face. That started to bring back other memories, ones she couldn't afford to be dwelling on. "I also wish my first call to you after all this time wasn't to ask for your help." And she was telling the truth. It was bad that the first word he'd heard from her after all these months was asking him for help. It made her feel like a real heel.

"I hope that help has something to do with you coming to my bed. Or me to yours. I'm flexible."

Rey couldn't help but smile and laugh, a single soft sound. "I'm afraid not. Remember my friend Mizuko? A pack of werewolves are after her. I don't know who they are, and I'm hoping you might."

"Business, huh? All right. Names and descriptions?"

Rey told him what she knew.

"Oh yeah. I know those guys. What's this information worth to you?"

"A favor," Rey replied easily. "One just like you're doing for me." She'd half hoped he might do it because of what she'd done for him, or for what they'd had together, however brief, but knew it was unrealistic.

"A favor, huh? How about something more concrete. Like you buying me lunch tomorrow at Pap Guido's."

"Sure. What time?"

"Noon."

"I'll be there."

"Okay. It sounds like you've run into one of the few remaining Pure packs within Mythic City. They are all bastards to deal with, but these guys are both smooth and crazy. Their leader is John Hell's Teeth. Fanatic that they call a 'Fire-Touched'. Suspicious to the point of insanity, but he's a pretty smooth operator as far as dealing with other wolves. And he's an artist. A painter, and a good one. He might dress and act like a punk, but his work is well known in the artist community of Mythic. His pack is supported by a spirit of significant power and these Pure don't mind going the extra mile for their alliances with their totem spirits. Also, they are all survivors of the Crusade the Forsaken called down on them. Expect nasty surprises from these guys."

"Great." Rey frowned. "Do you know anything about their totem spirit?"

"I wasn't dumb enough to get that close."

"Hey, one other thing," he added. "If those guys are after Mizuko, then it's probably because they think she's crazy or ridden by a spirit. Or both. To the Fire-Touched, crazy people are holy and used as vessels for prophecy by their lord. And to them there are only three kinds of supernatural beings: werewolves, spirits and mortals ridden by spirits, and abominations. They get along with the spirit-ridden and will even work with them on occasion."

"If you don't fit into their world view these crazies call you an abomination against the natural order of things and they *will* hunt you down and kill you. So, as long as they think she's nuts or spirit-ridden, she's probably safe."

"I appreciate the warning, Chase." Rey paused for a moment, deliberating whether or not to say something else, or if it should wait until they had lunch the next day. "You still living in Belle Park?"

"Yeah," he said. There was an irritable moan in the background. "And my girl. But she won't mind if you wanted to join us for an after-lunch treat." Rey heard a woman's voice in the background but couldn't make out the words. "Yeah, she's cute," he told the mystery date. "Anyway," he concluded, "that's all I got."

"Cute, huh," Rey replied with a chuckle. "I'll see you tomorrow."

"Bye," he said and hung up.

"Now," Rey murmured to herself as she leaned back on the over-sized couch, "to update Richard." She dialed his number.

"Hello." His voice was low and quiet, subdued.

"We got Mizuko back," she said, her own voice low, quiet and calm. "She's with Drake right now."

"I know. And she's changed. The Queen is very unhappy."

That was no surprise to Rey. "Is there anything I can do to help?" she asked, suspecting the answer would either be no, or to stay out of Veridia's way.

"At this point, unless you can recover the Mizuko Veridia knew and get her to beg and grovel for her position as Legate back, I don't think there is."

"Well, I don't know about getting that Mizuko back," Rey said, "but Minerva, a member of Remy's coterie, was able to help Mizuko recover all her memories. Though Mizuko prefers to be called Mira now."

"If she has her memories, why is she going by a new name?"

"Because Mizuko means water child," Rey explained, "and she says she's not a child anymore. She's got a lot more... spunk now. She won't be anyone's doormat anymore."

"I'm not sure I understand what you mean. Is she the same person or not? Did the vampires twist her around so much she'll never be the same? The main reason Veridia is upset right now is because she thinks that vampires have twisted and turned her Legate against her. She has these same questions."

"From the short time I've spent with her, she seems to be the same person. She's angry and appalled with what they did to her, and she led us straight to where she'd been held, though her captors were gone." Rey shrugged, though she knew Richard couldn't see it. "Regardless of what she's calling herself, I believe the woman we rescued is Mizuko."

"Maybe you should come speak to her tomorrow. See for yourself. If you think I'm at least partially right, perhaps the Queen can be persuaded to meet with Mira and see for herself who Mizuko has become."

"I don't know, Rey. You and the Queen are saying two different things. You're saying it's the same person and the Queen is saying she's someone different. To be honest I'm finding it hard to believe she could have come out of this intact, but I'm not the one that needs to be convinced either way."

"The Queen left before Minerva did her work. She didn't see Mizuko's reactions afterward. And you do need to be convinced, because the Queen trusts you a whole heck of a lot more than she trusts me." Rey wasn't bitter about the fact, just stating the truth. "But maybe it won't matter anyway." She shifted on the couch, now uncomfortable.

"Why do you think so?"

"Because there's a pack of evil, unstable werewolves who want her as their pet Oracle," Rey said. "And they'll likely kill her if she won't do their bidding." She didn't mention the danger she herself was going to face in trying to help Mira.

"Can they be negotiated with?"

"Depends," Rey said as she unzipped the fly of her jeans and kicked off her shoes. "If they truly believe Mira's just crazy, and I can convince them I'm being ridden by a spirit, then we might have a chance." She stood and slipped out of her pants, taking her panties off at the same time. "If not, they'll likely decide we're abominations and hunt us down and kill us. Or, maybe if we're lucky, they'll just beat the crap out of us like they did Less, Septimus and Worm." Rey shrugged out of her shirt.

"They attacked Winter?" he asked in the same, hushed tone.

"Yup." Rey unhooked her bra one-handed and after taking it off, gathered it up with the rest of her clothes and walked to her bedroom. "Probably gave him a concussion and a broken rib or two. He tried to find out how they learned about Mizuko. I warned him not to mess with them, but he wouldn't listen to the werewolf expert. Nope, he had a "window" he wanted to exploit." She threw her clothes into the laundry hamper. "They could have easily ripped his arm off and beat him with it if they wanted, but no, he did something that was sure to piss them off. They'll likely do the same or worse to me." Her casual tone waivered as she thought again about the danger Mira was in, and what they'd likely do to her. "Hell," she muttered, not realizing she was speaking aloud. "They see the tattoo on my back and they'll take me as a brood mare."

"Then don't do it, dummy," he scolded her. "There are other options."

Rey paused in mid pace. "Did you just call me dummy?" she asked in surprise.

"I did," he said. "You're supposed to be the werewolf expert. You just got done criticizing the Winter King's tactics and now you are going to do the same thing? If it's as risky as you say, then yeah. Doing that is dumb. Use your resources."

"You're very lucky I love you so much." She plopped herself down on the edge of the bed. "And believe it or not, I am doing what you so eloquently suggested." Her smile was easily heard in her voice. "That's how I found out those werewolves were Pure, and what their leader's name was. After I get some sleep, I've got to try and find the werewolf pack I'm allied with and see if I can convince them to help. Shouldn't be too hard, since my pack and the bad guys are mortal enemies."

"Good. You shouldn't be risking getting your arms ripped off, then," he interjected.

"No, I kind of like my arms where they are. I don't suppose you might be able to come over for a little while before I head out? It would be a big help."

"Would you rather me head to your place than keep an eye on Veridia?"

"Nope, not at all." Rey's voice dropped a tone or two. "It's just that I was hoping to roll around on top of you so I'd be covered in your scent." Surprisingly, she was being serious. "The pack's rather low on suitable mate material, and walking into their place smelling like you would go a long way toward moving me from the eminently eligible list to the I'm taken so stop looking at my luscious bod like I'm a three course aphrodisiac-laced meal one." Or least she hoped it would. Sometimes evidence was needed to back up words. She laid back on the bed and stroked her lower abdomen.

He sighed. "My job sucks sometimes."

"Everyone's does." She hoped he didn't hear the slight catch in her breath when her fingers slid lower and caressed her hidden piercing. "When things have quieted down a bit, I'd like you to meet my furry friends. It'd need to be somewhere neutral, though. You're too big and dominant to bring into one of their hangouts without them already knowing you." Rey's hips shifted and she bit back a sigh before withdrawing her questing hand and laying it flat on the bed beside her.

"Okay, but if they don't know what I am, I'd prefer to keep it that way," he said.

"They know you're the man I chose and that you make me happy," Rey replied. "Very, very, very happy." She glanced over at the clock and grimaced. "I'd better go, my love."

She could hear the smile and the gentle affection in his voice. "Night, Rey."

—

Rey was able to reach Jesse, the mortal who represented the Storm Front pack in many kinds of dealings and whom Rey was fairly sure had a direct line on the werewolves. Jesse set up a time to meet with Chaska at the Rusty Sprocket and told Rey it was likely that Lyla would be there as well.

The Fairest called Less to let him know she'd arranged for a meeting with her friends at 3 pm, if he was still interested in coming with her. The time was good for her, as it allowed for a decent meal with Chase.

Lunch with Chase was, well, predictable. Chase continued to flirt with Rey in vague hopes she might come home with them, even though Rey had made it clear she'd chosen her man. He didn't push this time, but Rey could tell he wanted to. Luckily the lunch date ended before Chase could press Rey to give him a reason why she hadn't called.

Now getting close to the meeting time with Storm Front's alpha, Rey contacted Less on the phone.

Less was still a bit sore from the beating the day before, but he'd gotten some good rest. Not as much as he would have liked, since his Kingly duties never ceased, but it had been enough. He waited for Rey on the street outside his building wrapped in his worn pea coat. While he waited he couldn't help but checking behind him every few minutes. He wasn't sure how he could find out if the ghost Veridia had assigned to keep tabs on him was still following him around. Normally he didn't have time to dwell on it but the down time had him paranoid.

When Rey pulled up, he was glad to get in out of the cold. The car was toasty warm and comfortable, and a thermal mug waited in the cup holder between the seats.

"Tea for you in the mug," she said with a smile, "made just the way you like it."

Less could taste the small amount of Jarmyn steeped in with the tea. "Mm, nice. Thank you."

The car pulled away from the curb and Rey glanced at Less before speaking. "I'm bringing you to meet a couple of friends of mine. Where we're going is one of their hang outs, their turf, so there are a couple of things I'd like to tell you. Please let me do most of the talking until things are squared away. They'll be very straightforward, and will speak their minds.

"Thing might be a bit tense when we first come in. They don't like strangers, but it should tone down a bit when they find out you're with me. Several of the guys there may show an intense... interest in me. Please ignore it. Don't meet any of them directly in the eye, try not to make any of them angry. If any of them are pacing around, stay away and leave them alone. That means they're agitated and are far more likely to lose their temper.

"Lyla and Chaska know what I am, though all the others know is that I'm a shapeshifter. They know Ishtar is a Queen, but anything else they know about our kind wasn't from me. And I don't know if they're aware of Cassandra MacArthur? now going by the name of Ishtar.

"Your position as the King of Winter will mean nothing to them at all. I'm accepted because I'm a friend, but that's just given me a foot in the door, so to speak. Everything else they might know they found out from someone other than me. Since this isn't an official visit or request from the Duchy, but a personal one from me, I think it might be best to simply introduce you as a friend of mine."

Rey looked at Less out of the corner of her eye. "I think that's about it. Do you have any questions?"

Less wondered why she was bothering to bring him along if he was just going to be in the way. "Nope. Just stay close to you and listen. Got it."

"You don't have to act like we're attached at the hip," Rey said, biting back a little smile. "I don't know who all will be there, and I've never brought anyone with me to visit before. Not even Richard. There's a bar, of course, so you can grab yourself a drink if you want. I'm just trying to minimize any potential problems, and show you that not all werewolves are smack you over the head first, and talk later."

"Fair enough. Where are we going, exactly?"

"A biker bar called the Rusty Sprocket, on the outskirts of Santa Fe."

Less flashed Rey an 'are-you-serious?' look but just sighed. He adjusted the position of his umbrella so it wouldn't scuff his Oxfords during the lengthy drive and settled back into his seat. Fidgeting with his hat in his lap, he asked, "So, did you find out who John and his cronies were?"

"Yes. They're evil werewolves. Enslave humans. Kill them out of hand on a whim. Human females are really

good for sex and breeding. They're cruel, heartless, and you're very lucky they just beat you up. They must really want Mira, otherwise they likely would have just torn your arms off and beat you to death with them." Rey looked over at Less. "And no, I am not kidding. I've seen what they're capable of. They're monsters in every sense of the word."

Less was a bit surprised that anything was known about them at all. "So why haven't they been taken care of already? If its known that four evil monsters are running around Mythic, why hasn't anyone done anything about it?"

"What makes you think there hasn't been?" Rey turned off the freeway and steered her car toward the rough side of town, paying little attention to the neighborhoods getting worse and worse as they drove by. "There used to be a *lot* more of them in Mythic. In fact, they used to control all of Mythic and the surrounding area until recently. John's pack is one of the few surviving packs, and one of the most dangerous. Religious fanatics."

"What does that mean: religious fanatics?"

"Exactly what it sounds like. Take the cultists from Waco, add in the abilities of a supernatural, fast regenerating shapeshifter with a bad attitude, a violent temper, and a dash of insanity, and that's a kind and gentle description of John's pack. They have a very narrow world view. To them, there are only three kinds of supernatural beings other than werewolves: spirits and mortals possessed by spirits, and abominations. They get along well and will work with spirits and possessed mortals, but they kill abominations, no questions asked. They know Mira is an oracle, so that makes her valuable to them, so as long as they hold that belief, they won't kill her."

"So, do they think Mira is possessed by a spirit? Does that mean they can't actually see the spirits, they just judge by a mortal's actions?"

"They can see spirits. And by spirits, I don't mean ghosts. I'm referring to tree spirits, dog spirits and so on. They can't tell by looking at someone if they're possessed, so yes, they have to judge by the person's actions. As for what they think about Mira, I have no idea. They know she's a supernatural of some kind, but they also might think she's insane. They believe the insane can be prophets."

"We have to stop them from getting Mira, and convince Mira not to answer their questions. If John's pack uses her prophetic abilities to help them plan their attacks, they will wipe out my friends. Torture and convert the ones they can, torture and kill the ones they can't."

Less nodded.

Arrival at the Rusty Sprocket showed the bar lived up to the old dive the name implied it was. There was only one other car in the lot and one motorcycle parked right in front of the bar. Less and Rey walked in, feeling a little like they were entering an old west saloon.

The lighting was dim, but they saw the bartender polishing the bar absently while he looked over some inventory papers. He didn't look up when Rey and Less entered. A native American was leaning back on two legs of his chair, apparently asleep, in the corner of the room while a gorgeous woman lounged next to him, apparently reading the newspaper. The man popped one eye open to look at Rey and Less.

A smile covered Rey's face. "Hi Chaska, Lyla." She gestured slightly to Less. "This is Less Seleman."

"Hello," Chaska said amiably as he lowered he chair flat to the floor.

Lyla put away the paper and stood up. She offered her hand to Less.

Less shook her hand but didn't say anything. He looked around the bar and wondered why werewolves came here given what the smell of stale beer was doing to his own human nose.

Lyla sat down again, a signal for the others to sit as well. Less noted that Chaska hadn't moved to stand as she did this, but had simply taken out a large hunting knife which he was using to clean and trim his fingernails.

"How've you been?" Chaska asked Rey.

"About the usual," she replied, not the slightest bit perturbed by his actions. She knew why he was acting that way, and it made perfect sense to her. "How about you?"

"The pack is strong," he said simply. "Jesse said you wanted to meet about the Pure." While the alpha wolf seemed comfortable and idle, Lyla was alert and taking a good look at Less.

"Yes. As of last night, we have a common enemy," Rey said. "The pack of John Hell's Teeth." She watched Chaska's face. He was, in many ways, like Richard; his face was hard to read, but she'd learned some of his body language when they'd known each other before.

"Why don't you tell me about your problem," Chaska said, keeping it low-key.

"They're after a friend, one whom they believe is an oracle." Typical Uratha negotiating tactics, Rey thought to herself. Chaska's in the superior position right now, but that could change.

"Are they right?"

"No." Rey shook her head, and it was the truth. Yes, Mira can tell the future, but she's not an oracle in the Delphi meaning of the word.

"I haven't heard of Hells Teeth," he said. "Usually you can handle meeting new wolves. So what's different?"

"They're Fire-Touched, and we've already had a couple of encounters with them; Less as recent as last night." Rey looked at him, waiting for him to give a description of what happened.

"I met them with a couple of friends," Less began, wishing he had a beer. "They were following our friend and I wanted to find out how they found out about her visions. We met them in her apartment instead of her. I was prepared to negotiate a time and a place for time with the oracle but they weren't interested in talking. They beat us up and left."

"Visions. Thank you, Mr. Seleman." Chaska looked at Rey. "If I'm going to be able to help you, Rey, I need all the facts. No splitting hairs, no leaving things out. Tell about yours and your friend's encounters, when and where. If there is something you know about this pack that you haven't said, then tell me".

Rey told Chaska everything she knew, from Mira's first encounter at Glasshouse to the werewolves presence at the pond, and what Chase had told her. "I'm worried. Mira can get glimpses of the future. She and I disagree over whether or not they are set in stone, but I'm pretty sure they're looking for something a lot more useful to them than that. They're already angry because of the deception, but if they don't get what they want..."

Rey's explanation satisfied Chaska, and he agreed with something else. "I think you're right. The future *is* changeable and knowing what a likely future is before it happens can be a huge advantage."

Lyla added to the conversation for the first time. "The only explanation for this pack to have been missed during the Crusade is that they hid from us when we scoured the spirit world looking for them. If they stayed out of Shadow by hiding in plain site within Mythic City itself, they could have been missed by the smaller packs. Since your queen threatened war if I enter the city, the trackers I lead haven't entered either."

"Well then," Chaska said, "since you can't go there without risking another war, you'll have to sit this one out."

Lyla fumed. "Chaska, I'm the hunter of this pack. I should be there."

"We aren't starting a war with people we can't distinguish from humans," Chaska said firmly. From his tone, he was already done talking about it. Lyla got up forcefully enough to knock her chair over and stalked over to the bar.

"I can change that," Rey said. "Both the problem of going into Mythic, and being able to tell us apart. The first will take a bit more time, but the latter I can take care of right now."

"How?" Chaska asked.

"It'd be through my magic, something called a pledge. Pledges can be created for thousands of different things, but what I'd do is called ensorcelment. I'd grant you the ability to see through the magic that hides what I am. It'd last for a cycle of the moon, and in exchange, you promise not to tell anyone about what you see or what you learn. If you break your promise, you'll lose the ability immediately, and I'll know it."

Chaska considered, then said, "Thanks, but no. The pack can't fully trust an alpha that's been ensorcelled by another, no matter how benign it seems. And I can't trust anyone else not to abuse that ability for their own ends." He spoke softly and his eyes threw a look in Lyla's direction. "And honestly, it's not in your own best interests. If you give away your people's ability to hide, then they are vulnerable."

"I didn't think I'd have to worry about you hunting my people," Rey replied simply. "Getting the ban lifted on Lyla will be difficult. I can't just go and say "please don't kill my friends if they come into Mythic". I need something more." She glanced over at Lyla. "But getting them in Mythic isn't the only option. I know for a fact they know where my friend lives, and she lives in Santa Fe. It'd be trickier, but it could be done."

"Home ground advantage can be overwhelming. If you can get them down here, we should be able to wipe the floor with them," Chaska said. "But if we have to challenge them in their own territory, it will be a lot bloodier. There they will be able to call upon spirit allies and move from locus to locus. It'd become a deadly cat and mouse game until we corner them. If we corner them. But if you get them down here..."

"Give me some options of where to lead them."

"Western outskirts of town would be safest for the human population."

"I'll let you know when I find somewhere suitable," Rey said. Remy owns some property there, she thought, I wonder if he might allow us to "borrow" for an evening.

Chaska nodded. "Anything else?"

Rey looked at Less to see if there was anything he wanted to say or ask. He shrugged and shook his head.

"I think that's it. Maybe, we can get together again soon for something a bit more social. If he can make it, I'd like to bring my mate along so you can meet him."

Chaska smiled. "Look forward to it."

—

Mira awoke with diffused sunlight upon her face. She blinked awake, groggy, bleary-eyed and completely disoriented. For a long moment she had no idea where she was. A look around told her she was in an unfamiliar bedroom with a pair of curtained windows. The curtains were drawn, but the bright, cold winter sun managed to shine through anyway. Memories of so many places she'd bedded down for the night danced around in her mind.

A sliding closet door stood open and she spotted a number of men's shirts hanging. That jogged her memory enough she remembered that Drake had taken her home with him the previous night.

To match her moment of disorientation, a glance at the clock astonished her by showing it was well after four in the afternoon. She sat up quickly, then moaned as her head ached in complaint. She still struggled to get a handle on which memories were her original ones and which were placed there by Xavier. It was confusing and difficult. Although she was grateful to Minerva for bringing her memory back, she was still stuck with the stuff Xavier had put there. In time, she hoped, this would be easier.

She lowered her legs over the side of the bed and then cradled her head in her hands while she waited for the pounding to relent.

"Morning," Drake said softly from the doorway. He wore a pair of navy sweatpants, and was both bare chested and bare footed.

Mira lifted her head. *"Heya, handsome. I think I missed the entire morning."* She stood up and began searching for her clothes. *"I need to figure out where Amber is, find a witch, and bargain for a ward. I better not keep lazing about like this."*

"It's morning because you just woke up," Drake replied with a smile. "Before you do anything else, you need to have something to eat." His head tilted slightly to one side. "I have to say my shirt looks good on you." His Mythic University t-shirt came halfway down her thighs.

She did him the courtesy of switching to sign so that he could devote his attention to admiring her body. "I'd go around dressed only in this if I didn't have to leave your place."

"You won't hear me complaining," he replied with a chuckle. "What are you in the mood for as far as food is concerned?"

She took her time answering, letting her eyes roam over his chest. "What do you usually have this time of day?" she signed.

"A sandwich or the like. I don't normally eat dinner until after seven."

"A sandwich sounds fine," Mira signed. "So, are you going to help me find my clothes or do I have to steal some of yours?"

"Won't be stealing if I lend them to you," he replied with a grin. "They're in the bathroom. First door on the left."

The bath was attached, but she walked past Drake anyway, taking the time to give him a light kiss, then lent a little extra motion to her hips as she walked away.

She was delighted to find that she'd managed to keep the new clothes she'd purchased the day before, but

decided to take a shower first. The cleansing, refreshing spray was a rejuvenating little piece of heaven. When she finished, dried quickly and then dug into her stash of new clothes, ignoring those she'd pulled off the night before. After finding something new and sexy to wear, she took the time to add a little bit of her makeup using skill she was surprised she had, and then put on the jewelry.

Mira found Drake in the kitchen, where he'd set out the fixings for sandwiches. He'd changed into black jeans and a red shirt which he wore untucked. When he heard her footsteps, he turned and looked at her. After a moment, he said "That's a new look for you." He leaned back against the bar and waited for her to get closer, a slow smile forming on his face.

She did. "Do you like it?" she put her hands on the bar at either side of him and leaned close.

"What do you think?" Drake waited to see what she would do next. Mira was different than Mizuko, a lot more forward and sophisticated. It was interesting, but he didn't know yet if he liked it.

"I think I asked because I didn't know." She drew away and hunted through the sandwich fixings.

That was more like the Mizuko he'd known. "The changes in you are going to take some getting used to," Drake admitted. He started putting together his own sandwich from the stuff he'd laid out.

Mira was silent as she put together something that was mostly vegetables and bread. When she finished, she sighed, and said, *"I'm the same person I was before. Xavier gave me memories and through them an ability to understand things that didn't make sense to me before. I got a frame of reference. I also never understood how to get things that I wanted. I do now. For me, this is adapt or die."*

"So, if what you were looking for was someone naive and inexperienced because she was isolated for most of her teenage years instead of developing social skills, you'll need to look for someone else. But if you are looking for a woman who knows what she wants and isn't afraid to try to get it, then that's me. That's who I always wanted to be but didn't know how."

"That's not what I was looking for." He'd stopped preparing his food. "What I found was a woman I was attracted to, who could kick ass like nobody's business. Someone I also respected. I thought she was shy, which was one of the reasons I wanted to go slow. Get a chance to know each other and make sure the attraction wasn't based on pure lust. I'm tired of women throwing themselves at me because of my looks, who see me as nothing more as a quick fuck. I was hoping to find more. If that's not what *you* want, I'll help you get your apartment protected, and then we'll go our separate ways."

"If that's all I wanted, I wouldn't have agreed to your rules to begin with. Is it wrong to show you some appreciation? I'm sorry if you can't tell if I'm honestly appreciating or just trying to seduce you in some selfish hope of fucking you and leaving you. I'd have thought that what I did for you in the car yesterday would have been a clue." Mira decided right then that men really were thick as a two by four. She rolled her eyes and hoped Drake would figure it out soon.

"No, it's not wrong to show appreciation, it's just..." He shrugged helplessly. "There are other ways it can be done. Don't get me wrong, I liked what you did, but you don't need to use sex to do it."

"I believe in action more than words. Always have," Mira said. *"And it's not as if I was yanking your pants down just now or anything."*

"True, but it could easily have been a hug," Drake replied with a soft chuckle. "I also thought that if you knew what you wanted, you'd be able to recognize the results of your efforts. You didn't look at my pants when asked your question." The effect she had on him when she walked in the room had subsided, but he'd been glad his trousers had been loose.

Mira looked away. *"You already think I'm too forward. Staring at your crotch isn't going to help that."*

"All it would have taken was a quick glance," Drake replied with a grin.

She sighed. *"What exactly are we arguing about again?"*

Drake looked at her, then shook his head. "Let's eat and get going."

—

Mira gave Drake an address and they drove in silence. She didn't want to distract him from driving and she'd promised before she'd stop doing that. When they arrived, they found themselves at the back entrance of a club that was just opening for the night. They'd approached from the rear so Drake hadn't seen a sign for it. Mira hopped out of the car and knocked on the door.

Drake wasn't about to let Mira go into the witches' den alone. He made sure his car was parked somewhere it wouldn't get towed and joined her.

Mira had to be persistent, but eventually someone opened it and Mira spoke to them a while. Finally, the woman at the door relented and opened the door wide to let her in.

Drake got a look at the woman Mira was talking to. Her back was to him as she led the way inside. She had long, very dark brown hair that spilled over her shoulders in silky locks. She had on a black and white servant's uniform but the skirt was scandalously short, barely hiding her aft cheeks. This therefore left the tops of her stockings exposed, as well as the garters holding them. He only saw the profile of her face as she paused at the door, opened it and stuck her head inside.

"Miss Naia here to see you, ma'am." She left the door open and headed toward stairs, while Mira altered course and led the way inside.

Mira brought them inside a dimly lit room filled with comfortable couches and cushions. There was an open space too, and at the far end of the room there appeared to be an altar set up with unlit incense, oils and various containers. There was one other woman in the room. She was tall, thin, and had black hair. Or at least it looked black in this light. She might have been in her thirties and still quite attractive. She was seated cross-legged and sideways on a couch, using an adjacent cushion as a table while she read tarot. She continued to stare at the cards for a minute while Mira and Drake waited quietly.

Finally, she put the cards back in the deck, then went over to the altar and placed the cards there. "Mizuko, wasn't it?" she asked as she turned back around.

"Yes. Well, Mira now if you don't mind. This is Drake." Drake followed Mira into the room. "Drake, this is Arra. We met just last week."

"We don't have men down here under normal circumstances," said the witch. Despite that, her eyes said he was quite welcome. She smiled at Drake a little.

"I apologize," Mira said. *"I didn't realize."*

"It's okay. I don't expect you to know our quirky little traditions. What can I do for you, Mira?"

"I'm having a problem keeping beings out of my apartment. I'm looking for someone who can put up a ward"

to protect my home from further attacks and invasions. I thought this might be an area that a witch's expertise might be most helpful."

"Really?" Aurra seemed surprised. She looked from Mira to Drake. "I would have thought you, or perhaps your fey prince here might already have spells like that."

"I'm afraid it's not something I can do," Drake replied with a sexy smile. "And I appreciate your bending the rules for me tonight." He glanced at the cards. "I hope we didn't disturb your reading."

"Not at all," Aurra replied. "I was doing a little reading to see if tonight might be a good night to seek a little friendly companionship." She gave him a long look.

Mira looked between the two of them, then broke in. "*So. Have I come to the right place.*"

Aurra dragged her eyes away from Drake. "Hm? Oh yes, you have hon. In fact, I do all the wards for my little coven."

Mira knew Aurra was being modest. Her coven was far from little and she did all the wards, then the chances were Aurra was very good at what she did. "*I've had several attacks at my apartment. Most of these things find locked doors and the 11th story location to be not much of a problem. I need something strong and that will last.*"

"A permanent ward? That's not easy. Something like that requires a sacrifice of some of the witch's personal strength."

"I'm willing to bargain."

Aurra had looked a little disinterested with the prospect until Mira mentioned that. "A nymph come to bargain with a witch?" She looked at Mira and Drake in a new light. "Now that's a switch."

"Mira, do you know how a ward works?"

Mira shook her head.

"All right. A ward isn't meant to be foolproof. If it was, then the first nasty creature that turned out to be stronger than the witch that placed the ward would pop the thing and it would collapse. No more ward. Good wards give you an edge and make it very difficult for creatures to harm you or your property. They don't make it impossible."

"So, the magic bends instead of breaks?"

"Something like that. Wards cannot protect against everything. Only most things. Again, if you try to make Fort Knox, the magic gets brittle, so to speak."

Mira nodded.

"You'll choose one class of being that the ward will affect. A single location can have up to five wards. No more than that. As the primary resident of the place, you'll have the power to invite beings that are members of those classes. But beware! Once you invite them, they will never again be affected by the ward. No take-backs."

Mira nodded again.

"So let's talk price. As this requires a permanent sacrifice on my part, I think it only fair to ask you to sacrifice

at least as much."

"*What kind of sacrifice?*"

Aurra smiled. "What is this worth to you? How much is your safety worth?"

Mira narrowed her eyes in thought, nibbled her lip, then looked to Drake for help.

Drake looked at Aurra and asked "Once in place, the ward cannot be moved, correct? So if for some reason she moves out, she can't take it with her."

Aurra nodded. "That's right."

Drake took a moment to think. Were it another changeling, he'd suggest fashioning a token to Aurra's request. He doubted the witch would take an item that would require the catch being used every time. "Personally, my home is just a place to keep my stuff, and I keep nothing there of true value, and it's an apartment, so you can be booted out of there at any time. The immovability of the ward is also a concern. Still, if I were doing it on a place I cared about and planned on staying there a very long time, I would think such a service would be worth a Favor."

Mira's eyes lit up. "*That's a really good idea. Would you accept a favor of like importance? If it was just me, I wouldn't trouble you with this. But I have a friend who rooms with me and she's mortal. I'm worried that some of these things will hurt her.*"

"A favor?" Aurra sounded a little dubious. "What guarantee do I have that when I ask, you'll come through?"

"*Because I'll swear to it. And, if that isn't enough I assume that since you put the ward up, you could also take it down if you wanted to.*"

Aurra nodded.

"*And if I screwed you on this, you'd probably also do the supernatural equivalent of posting 'for a good time see' with my name and address on a bulletin board.*"

Aurra smiled.

"*Since I know that, I wouldn't renege even if my word was not my bond. If you do this for me, Aurra, I swear I'll grant thee a favor once, small or large, so long as it would not cost me my life.*"

Aurra thought about it a while, then said, "Per ward."

"*Each ward requires a sacrifice?*"

"Yes."

Mira gritted her teeth. This was going to be damned expensive. "*Okay. One favor per ward.*"

"When do you need the wards done?" Aurra asked.

"*Tonight.*"

The witch's eyebrows rose. "Are you in trouble?"

"*I have a pack of werewolves hunting me and there are vampires out there that have been messing with my*

head. Also I've been under attack by fae beasts from the Otherworld."

"Would the ward protect the people inside it from powers being used remotely on them?" Drake remembered how Remy had summoned Mira to him.

"Yes. My wards tap into various other powers I have to repel attack. Because of the sacrifice she asks of me, a piece of my soul will remain behind to power it. Don't worry, it will grow back in time. But this is why I ask a high price. Her place will be difficult to break into and even harder to damage by the warded groups. In addition while she is there any attempts to influence her will be greatly inhibited."

"You can ward against fae beasts, not just against all fae?" Drake asked. If that was the latter, it could cause some problems.

"Any group that can be described. If you were to say, anything fae or fae-touched, that would work. I have a ward at my home that protects me from hunters, which I've described as mortals who hunt beings with supernatural powers. And that works pretty well, if I do say so myself."

"Would you be able to do three wards tonight? One for all things fae, one for all things werewolf, and one for all things vampire?" Mira asked.

Aurra replied, "I can. I'll need to be there and it will take me several hours. Just be sure you hold up your end of the bargain."

"You'll have solid proof when the wards are complete," Mira promised.

After that, Mira gave Aurra her address and they were ready to set out for Santa Fe. Drake dropped Mira off at her apartment to wait for Aurra.

—

Worm's Report

Sunday evening, Less was contacted by his Sergeant-in-Morning?, Worm. After the beating they'd taken, she took it upon herself to research patterns of violence in Santa Fe. It turns out that there had been a lot of reports of violence over the past couple years in and around Santa Fe and other outlying towns, but no one ever seemed to be able to find perpetrators or victims. Destroyed trees, blood, even buildings had been damaged, yet nothing had ever come of it. Worm proposed that when mortals did bear witness to such violence, they were too scared to report it. Worm pointed out the MO of the violence matched what had happened to them, but on a wider scale spread out over a couple years.

Less was impressed by her initiative and told her so. "Rey mentioned to me these particular werewolves are some sort of religious fanatic. Aside from werewolves, they only tolerate spirits and mortals possessed by spirits. Anything else they try to destroy. Her friends dropped the term 'The Pure' when referring to John Hell's Teeth's pack. I'm not sure why they would destroy trees or buildings unless they had somehow become abominations." Something Chaska had said occurred to him. "Rey's friends mentioned that since Mythic was his territory, John would have "locuses" in town that would protect them. Perhaps this sort of violence is their way of sanctifying a place?" Less was brainstorming to himself. It was certainly worth bringing to Rey's attention. "Rey's plan is to lure John and his pack to Santa Fe. Once out of their territory they would be sitting ducks for Rey's werewolf friends."

"Well," said the short tunnel grub, "I would want to confer with the Master of Grief on that. But I might point out that as violent as they are, it strikes me that any conflict among these werewolves is likely to result in collateral damage. Further, the use of the term Pure may insinuate other connections. For example, various religious sects consider themselves more "pure" than others by virtue of their belief rather than by their

treatment of the environment. But again, my specialty is mundane information. The Master of Grief may have other input.

"Rey's plan sounds good," Worm added. "Of course the major trick is to lure them into an area they may know is enemy territory. If the trap is obvious, they aren't going to want to make themselves into those sitting ducks."

Less nodded. "Great work, Worm. Take your report to Septimus and tell him about the Pure and their possible locuses. They don't much matter if Rey can lure them to Santa Fe but he'll want to look into it."

"Yes sir," Worm confirmed.

—

Rey dropped Less off and went straight home and locked the door behind her. If the Pure had been tracking Mira by scent, then it was a good chance they might have found the scents of everyone else and could follow them home. A locked door wouldn't do much to deter a werewolf, but it would lend credence to the theory they weren't welcome should they have decided to come have a chat with her.

After grabbing herself a beer, she sent a text to Richard, telling him she'd made headway in getting the werewolves dealt with, and that she's home now and plans to be for the rest of the day and evening. She then spread out the map she had of Santa Fe and the surrounding area. Chaska wanted something west of the city, somewhere there wouldn't a lot of people. The warehouses Remy owned wouldn't do - they were neat the freeway and off a major thoroughfare. Too much of a chance for attention to be drawn and innocents to get harmed. While the Pure would certainly have no care for the safety of normals, she wasn't too sure the Storm Front pack would go out of the way to protect them either.

Santa Fe petered out pretty quickly as it headed toward the hills to the west of the city. Not much profit in developing the land, she remembered reading. Costs to build would be exorbitant, and outside what they could possibly get for the sale of homes - multi-million dollar homes just weren't being purchased these days.

Rey trailed her finger over the map, and found a road that left Santa Fe and wound out into the hills. About thirty miles out, there was a campground. Isolated, and most campgrounds weren't open this time of year. She grabbed her laptop and within a couple of minutes, she had not only a name, but the online brochure, maps and just about everything else someone wanting to choose a site for an ambush and battle could want.

Her phone buzzed, reporting the arrival of an incoming text. It was from Richard. It read, "I'm taking Veridia to your place in an hour. She wants to talk about last night. Might be a good idea for the Winter King to be there."

As she read that, her phone rang and popped up an unfamiliar number with "<Unknown>" in the name field. With a slight frown, she pressed the connect button and said "Hello?"

"Hi Rey, it's me," said Mira. "I just wanted to let you know that we're getting things set up here at the apartment. Were you able to contact your werewolf friends?"

"I did. They'll help, but to minimize the danger, it needs to be outside the city," Rey replied. "I found a campground outside Santa Fe. It's not open this time of year, so it should prevent any humans from getting caught up in it. Problem is, the werewolves after you aren't going to be that willing to head into potential enemy territory, and it's a good chance they'll suspect a trap. We need to find a way to draw them there without them being too suspicious. All four of them."

There was a drawn out pause. Finally, Mira said, "I'm not sure how to do it without lying."

"Well, they're looking for you, wanting to talk to you. They beat up Less to send you a message. A meeting between you and them could be arranged."

"Making contact with them isn't hard," Mira said. "But it does have to be in person since I can't just call them up on the phone."

"Actually, it might not have to be in person," Rey said thoughtfully. "John, their leader, is an artist. I could ask around, see if I can find a gallery that carries his work and see if a message could be gotten to him."

"That's not a bad idea," Mira said. "Be careful not to do something that will expose you to them. You already took a bullet for me in the past couple days. That's your quota."

"I have no intention of seeking them out in person." Rey wasn't willing to get cornered by any of those wolves. She was going to take some precautions, use a disguise to throw them off the scent, so to speak. But if any of them had caught a whiff of her before, they'd know who she was. That was a risk she was willing to take for all her friends.

"Good. Then you'll let me make whatever kind of contact," Mira said.

"I don't know, Mira," Rey said, "I doubt their idea of negotiations will be, well, cordial. You know what happened to Less."

"They made it very clear they didn't like being tricked into working with a go-between. Stay clear of them, don't let them get their hands on you. The *only* way they are going to harm me is through my friends. So, I have no intention of letting them get to my friends."

"What they did was make it clear they didn't want to be deceived. There's no way you can taken on four werewolves by yourself, Mira. We have to find a compromise." Rey shook her head even though she knew Mira couldn't see it. "You can't help them, can't look into the future for them. If you do, they'll use the information to kill people. And if they find out you can't do what they think you can, they might kill you too."

"Rey, I never said I was going to take on four werewolves by myself. I wouldn't try that unless it was to save you or Less." Mira sighed. "Look, I was trying to be gentle about this because I don't want to hurt your feelings, but the fact is, I can escape these situations. Or at least, I have a damn good shot at escape. You don't. This is my problem and while I appreciate your help, I don't want you getting captured again and used to force me to do things I don't want to do. This is my risk to take if I choose. Not yours."

"Have you ever negotiated with a werewolf before, Mira?"

"I thought you just told me you wanted to lure them into a trap and kill them, not negotiate with them. Just a minute." Mira muffled the phone for a moment while she spoke to someone. Rey couldn't make out the speech but from the pitch the voice sounded female, but not Amber. "Sorry about that. I'd come and talk to you about this in person, but I can't leave my apartment right now. I have a witch setting up a ward and I need to keep watch in case those wolves come back here."

Rey sighed. "Whatever. I've got work to do. Talk to you later." She shut down the call and tossed it onto the table. What did she have to do, get the words "she knows werewolves so you should damn well listen to her when she tells you about them" on her forehead? Picking up her beer, she downed half of it before retrieving her phone and dialing Less' number.

Less agreed to attend the meeting and set out straight away. He was at Rey's door within the hour.

While she waited, Rey called Mira back.

"Hello?"

"Hi, Mira. I wanted to apologize for earlier. Let me tell you the basics of my plan all the way through, and when I'm done, you can ask questions and make comments, okay?"

"Go ahead."

"The important thing we need to keep in mind is that when werewolves, they will do their best to negotiate from a position of strength. If they need to, they will beat you to a pulp, take you somewhere they feel comfortable and in control, then they open the dialog. So, we need to try and set up a situation that appears neutral, and one they think they can easily turn to their advantage, when in fact we hold as many cards as possible.

"It was my thought that I get you to write the note, setting up the meeting with John and his pack. Make sure you get your scent all over the paper, getting it smell like as much of you as possible. They likely have got your scent, so they'll be able to recognize that, at the very least, the paper was held by you. I find out which gallery represents John, and then the note gets delivered through the gallery.

"Now, I've got a location picked out, one that is outside the city so that it will limit the number of outsiders who could get caught up in this. I'll need to double check it with my friends to make sure it's not going to be a problem. It'd be great to scout it out ahead of time, see if we might have an escape route into the Hedge nearby if things go wrong.

"Now, I have said we, but I am not going to be on ground zero, so to speak. I'm not suicidal. I'll be on site, hopefully looking at you from a relative distance. They want you, so you'll need to be the bait. We'll need to meet with Chaska and Lyla to work out the details of the plan.

"So, there it is. Open to change as need be, but we've got to start somewhere."

Mira responded, "It sounds like a fine plan to me. I have a question, though. I hope we don't need a backup plan, but I want to have one just in case. Let's say they don't go for it. Maybe they decide they won't negotiate outside their territory. Whatever it is, if they don't go for it I might get stuck having to deal with them at least to buy us time to come up with another plan. What are they expecting me to be and how do I pretend to be that well enough to avoid getting mauled?"

"Based on what I've learned so far, they expect you to be either insane or a mortal who's being Ridden by a spirit. I'm not sure if there are any signs or symptoms of a Ridden mortal, but I have people I can call."

"Whatever you can find might help," Mira said. "They seem excitable and we definitely got off to a bad start with the wolves being pushy and me being stubborn. I want any edge I can get should Plan A fail."

"They're not just excitable," Rey said, "their emotions are just that much stronger. I wouldn't recommend trying to harvest any Glamour from them. It's at least two or three times as strong as a human's."

"*I hadn't planned on it,*" Mira said with a little amusement in her voice. It seemed to her rather a difficult thing to scare monsters like those. Better to scare humans if she wanted to harvest glamour from them, but she rarely did that either. Gleaning glamour from the bounty of the Hedge had always been her style and it still was. *"Amber is here now and I'll get her to stay within the warded apartment until all this is resolved. It isn't foolproof but it should give her enough of an edge to at least call for help."*

"The key will get her to actually stay there," Rey replied. "I have to go. Need to make a couple more phone calls. I'll get back to you once I have any more solid info."

Joshua met Rey in Iron Mountain. The earth bones was in one of the many side rooms offered by the grand Duchy Hollow, one he traditionally used when he wanted to study but was open to entertain guests. His library wasn't here; he only brought "light reading".

Today, the Lord Sage was seated near a fire pit that had a sand floor. She approached him but paused a few steps away and waited for an invitation to sit.

He looked up from a large tome and smiled. "Ah, fellow Sage." He gestured to a companion chair. While she sat, he continued. "I have heard some interesting rumors about your motley, some of which appear exaggerated." He gave Rey a smile as he glanced up at her, then he returned his gaze to his book and turned a page.

"What have you heard," Rey asked, wondering what gossip was traveling the Duchy grapevine.

"I heard the Legate quit her post and went rogue, shooting you in the process. Another source claimed the Winter King was attacked at the former Legate's apartment. People say she's quite lost her mind. They say such insanity can infect a motley." He smiled mildly. "But then some people have little to do but make drama out of rumor."

"Very true." Rey nodded. "I'd love to know who's spreading these tales. They're quite entertaining. But I do have some questions for you, about spirits. I've been reviewing what I know about werewolves and their interactions with spirits. One of the things some werewolves are concerned about are spirits and their interactions with mortals. My own werewolf contacts didn't give me much about when spirits Ride or Claim humans. Is there any information about that you can share with me?"

"Mortals make very good camouflage for spirits. I've even read some cases where the subject was not mortal all, but some other type of being. Witches and warlocks, even vampires could be taken. Whatever the host, it's a good place for a spirit to hide because there is no metaphysical way to detect its presence. Should the mortal still be in charge of decision-making, then you might never know. Unlike ghosts, however, spirits are utterly alien beings. Should the spirit be in charge, you may detect certain behavioral differences. Spirits have no real understanding of the human condition. They were never born as any kind of living creature, much less a human one. They may behave oddly or inappropriately in social situations and may develop inhuman aspects.

"There are often physical tells, once a spirit has been a part of the host for a long time. In these cases the spirit has convinced the host they should merge. Such a host becomes much more than what they once were, gaining characteristics and powers inherited from the spirit. These are invariably... quite alien."

Rey nodded. "The lack of a metaphysical method of detection was the only thing my friends could tell me." She paused and thought about something else. "Have you heard of a language called the First Tongue?"

He nodded.

"If a spirit has merged with its host, would the combined still be able to understand First Tongue?"

"It would seem probable."

"What about if the mortal was in charge? Would the mortal have access to the knowledge of the language?"

"That would depend entirely on the agreement the mortal made with the spirit," he said.

Rey nodded. "Do you know First Tongue?"

"No, no. I wouldn't be able to speak it anyway. It requires very different vocal cords." He looked at her curiously. "It sounds as if you are preparing to make some kind of bargain with spirits."

Rey shook her head. "No, but I might have the opportunity to observe someone who might have."

"I would find such an opportunity highly educational, myself."

"If it works out, I'll let you know." Rey shifted in her seat. "I'm afraid I have to go. I appreciate you taking the time to answer my questions. Some day, I might be able to return the favor."

He nodded to her in parting and smiled.

Aurra finally finished setting up the wards and Mira swore to appear and grant Aurra three favors within her power to grant and that would not be of a suicidal nature. The Wyrd formed physical tokens of the favors. These tokens took the form of small crystal roses. When Aurra would call in a favor, she would simply shatter the rose. The Wyrd would invoke the promise that Mira had made and she would respond as soon as possible. The fact they had physical form also meant they could be given to another, should Aurra choose.

The witch had been badly weakened by the experience. She seemed unfocused and confused, though she told a concerned Mira that it would pass in time. Such was the cost of infusing permanent magic. Mira walked her down to her car where Aurra's driver waited for her.

Mira returned to her apartment and noted the time was nearly midnight. Deciding it was too late to call Less, she made a mental note to call him in the morning, and turned in for the night.

Veridia and Richard arrived at Rey's house a few minutes after she returned from her visit with her fellow Sage. Richard had on his rigid game mask, giving nothing away. Veridia was the picture of calm control, yet she knew that this was when Veridia was at her most unpredictable.

Rey invited them in after greeting them with calm respect. Her mind, however, was anything but calm. Someone was spreading stories about what had happened, and it was only making things worse. "The Winter King will be joining us shortly," she said. Hopefully, she thought, he will help things stay on an even keel.

Veridia nodded and took a seat. Richard went to stand by a window and made like a statue.

Less arrived shortly after. He had made an effort to be presentable for the meeting but, as usual, his hair was a fly-away tangle. He had put on some fine Hedgespun clothing but in his haste he had worn his train station uniform jacket instead. He gave Rey a supportive smile below arching eyebrows before moving on into the room. He nodded to Veridia. "A pleasure to see you again."

Veridia rose and gave Less a deferential nod. "King Seleman. I'm glad you're here." She drifted toward the window by which Richard stood and stared out into the night. She was silent for a moment, taking her time to think.

"I'm glad the both of you are here," she said in a thoughtful tone. "You two both have some influence with Mizuko, though perhaps not as much as the vampires that have warped my Legate so severely. Since conversing with her myself appears to be impossible without Mizuko being belligerent, I was hoping the two

of you might be able to catch her and see what we might do about whatever the vampires did to her."

"A big step toward doing that was done before we all parted ways," Rey said. "The vampire, Minerva, was able to return the memories the vampire known as Xavier had taken from her. She remembers everything now."

Veridia turned from the window. "Yet, she's made no attempt to contact me and has ignored my messages. I think returning her memories may only be the first step."

"Some compromises may need to be made in order to go further." Rey spoke carefully, aware that she was treading on dangerous territory. "She prefers to go by the name Mira now. But regardless of what she calls herself, we must take into account what she has become before we can see what can be recovered." If anything, she added silently.

"And what has she become?" Veridia demanded.

"A more grown-up, more... adult version of herself," Rey said with no hesitation. "In the time Mizuko and I have been friends, we've talked about our pasts, our time with our Keepers, in generalities. One thing I learned is that she spent a lot of time alone. Isolated. She had no way to learn, or to practice, how to be around people. It appears she has that now. Why Xavier did that, I have no idea, but it was likely at the behest of the vampire who hired him."

"I think it might be important to figure out why. Don't you agree, King Seleman? What are your opinions and impressions?" Veridia turned to the Winter King.

"The motivations of this hostile vampire are a top priority, I assure you," responded Less. "The fact of the matter is that young Mizuko has grown up into Mira. What is your plan if Mira should decide she doesn't want the position of Legate of the Autumn Court?" he asked.

"I'll decide that when we get to that point. I'm not convinced that this is what she wants. Do you know she actually threatened me?" Veridia shook her head. "I've put in too much time on that girl to let it go to waste, despite her poor manners. I believe her mind has been altered. If I can examine her, draw it out, we might see what sort of madness with which they've infected her."

Rey glanced at Less in surprise, and wondered if Veridia might have taken whatever it was Mira had said the wrong way. "What exactly did she say, my Queen?"

"She said she quit, she was done being a puppet. She said I was selfish and that I had to accept her resignation so no one had to get hurt," Veridia said.

Rey nodded, but kept her thoughts to herself. She wasn't foolish enough to point out that Veridia had been treating Mizuko like nothing more than a puppet, a pretty package with a voice nobody could ignore.

"I believe she told you that while she was under the false memories of the vampire," said Less. "While that might be considered a type of madness, I think her poor manners are merely that - and her stubbornness. She has, like in so many faerie stories, transformed: from a girl into a woman. I believe she may now wish to lead a new life, to strike out on her own and carve a new path. I do not think that she bears us ill-will, quite the contrary, but you may wish to consider preparing an agreement to protect any Court secrets you do not want to accidentally slip out."

Veridia looked at Less and Rey. "Three times you have said to me that our Mizuko has grown up." Saying something three times always had special significance where the fae were concerned and Veridia took note. "True or not, I am at least convinced of your conviction that it is so. Still, I can't help but feel betrayed. I had worried her association with vampires would take her away from me. From our people. Now that it has

happened, it doesn't feel any better for having known it was coming."

The queen turned away again and faced the window. "Maybe I can forgive her the rudeness and hostility she showed me. I treated her like she was my own daughter. If I was controlling it was because I worry..." She was silent while she reflected on the past six months.

Finally Veridia turned to Richard. "One thing I can't forgive is what was done to her. I understand she's adapting as well as she can, but this was forced on her. Her mind altered and warped to the whims of a creature who surely had a plan in mind and likely still does. I want him found and I want him punished. Do it before this happens to more of us. Use the Ghul as our assassin and the Magister of Fear as our executioner. Whatever resources you need, you will have."

She turned to Less. "Autumn will gladly pay for any services the Wardens may be able to offer in this matter."

Less bowed to the Queen of Autumn. It hid the smile on his face that appeared when he imagined the invoices.

"If it helps, my Queen," Rey said, "Mira and Remy Deprez are no longer lovers. Just before she was taken, she had just left Remy in preference for Drake Mari, a warrior of Summer. When her memories returned, she remembered what they had started and she appeared willing to see it continue. Drake seemed willing as well, but only time will tell if their relationship will survive."

Chase stooped over, hands on his knees while he tried to catch his breath. Repeating his request wasn't helping his mood, either.

"Will you just ring her? This is an emergency!"

The old security man sighed and said, "Very well. I'll call her again, but if she's not there or doesn't want to answer, I can't let you in." He picked up the phone and listened. After several rings he was about to hang up again, but he caught himself.

"Miss Naia? I hope I haven't disturbed you. Ah, it's a quarter after twelve ma'am. I do apologize. It's just that I have this young man here and he says it's an emergency. Yes. He said his name was Chase? Very well, I'll send him up."

He buzzed Chase in and the werewolf didn't wait around for pleasantries. He charged to the elevator and then used the wait to make a phone call to someone else.

"In the end," Veridia said, "I'm not sure if it helps or not that Mizuko is having sex with the vampire." Veridia sighed and corrected, "Mira. Does anyone have any lead on who and where this vampire is that played with her? And how do these werewolves fit in?"

"The werewolves are a separate concern," Rey replied. "The vampire who altered Mira's memories goes by the name of Xavier. He's a mercenary, doing the job for anyone who can pay his price. He's also known for not undoing work he's done for someone else, even if someone tries to pay him to do so. The vampire who hired him goes by the name of Leopold. He's an enemy of Remy Deprez's, and this is not the first time he has attempted to get control of a changeling for his own benefit and to use as a weapon against Deprez. Leopold was believed to have been killed, but it was a decoy who had been slain."

"Do you think he was aware of who and what Mira was when he got hold of her? I was under the impression she was pretending to be just another girl Remy Deprez charmed when visible to vampire society."

"I'm not sure," Rey replied honestly. "If he didn't, he certainly found out when she tried to kill Xavier."

"Who was the first changeling this Leopold tried to get?"

"That would be me, my Queen," Rey said with a slight nod of her head. "Mira and Remy discovered his plan - how, I don't know - and Mira contacted friends of mine. They tracked him down and killed who they thought was Leopold before he could put whatever plan he had into action."

"So, how did Xavier defeat Mira? Did you get a measure of his relative power?"

"He is a specialist in mental manipulation and domination. Given his reputation, and what he was able to accomplish, I'd have to say he's an acknowledged expert in memory manipulation. If you want more details, then you'd best talk to Deprez."

"Clearly he is a mind manipulator. I had hoped you might be able to tell us how she was defeated. If it was through sheer force of will, then I fear our people. Mira has fairly common abilities; had she been able to hold her own we could have some hope that we have some defense against him. Unless trickery was involved? Mira often has... tunnel vision."

"She... gave in." Rey remembered the scene and the situation, and her hatred for Xavier and most vampires flared briefly. "Mira and I were taken at the same time, and I was to be used to ensure her co-operation. I told Mira what Xavier was and to kill him, but before she could, the servant Xavier had guarding me shot me in the leg. When Mira saw what had happened, she complied, not wanting to see me harmed any further. While Xavier was working on Mira, I convinced the woman guarding me to let me leave. When I was out of the condo, I immediately called the Paladin." She was tempted to tell her of her profound disappointment in Less' lack of faith in her in the time immediately following her escape, but decided not to.

"Trickery, then. She wasn't thinking of the big picture, what it would mean to the Duchy if even one changeling was captured alive. But then it is only natural for a person to not want to see her friends come to harm. You both were well used. These creatures are adept at manipulation." Veridia turned thoughtful. "Since they are vulnerable during the day, it's logical to assume they are also very careful creatures."

Veridia turned abruptly to Less. "Constable Seleman, I would request a specific information gathering mission of you. I need to know where this creature is. Either Leopold or Xavier will do. Once found we will use him to send a message that changelings are not to be trifled with. I will assign my Ghul and my executioner, the Magister of Fear, to be on hand the moment you have located them to exact our just vengeance with subtlety. In payment for the Wardens' efforts, credit for protecting the Duchy from the depredations of this monster will belong to Winter, since the vast majority of the Wardens belong to the Winter Court."

"Agreed, Veridia," said Less. "My network operates chiefly in Mythic. I believe Xavier, at least, has fled the area so once I pick up the trail I will have to expand my operations. This is slow work, I'm afraid, with many obstacles, but as soon as I know anything I will inform the Ghul and Magister."

Veridia bid them both a good night and, paladin in tow, she left the house.

Rey waited a moment or two, giving them a chance to get out of earshot before speaking again. "Less, there's

some trouble that needs to be dealt with immediately. I didn't want to bring it up in front of Veridia, because it would only make her angrier," she said as she walked back into the kitchen. "Somebody knows what's been going on, and has been spreading rumors. Dangerous rumors. That Mira was the one who shot me, that you were attacked at her place - implying she was the one who did the deed - and that Mira's gone completely insane and she's made us that way too."

Less pursed his lips. "Sounds like someone is jealous of our recent climb in stature. Suspect Number One is Vicissitude, of course. I'll see what I can do to track down the source and plant some propaganda of my own. It's probably best if we ignore it for the time being. Reacting might only make matters worse, but we should get Mira to a public Duchy event as soon as possible so she can show everyone she's not insane and has just re-invented herself. Perhaps a Spring Welcome party."

"You're kidding me." Rey could hardly believe her ears, but she maintained her calm. "You're just going to let the person spreading the rumors continue to do so? You might not care about your reputation, but some of us might. Unless, of course, you don't care that people are whispering the King of Winter is cracked."

"I believe I just said I would do what I could to track down the source and suggested a plan to counter the rumours. My resources are going to be stretched thin tracking vampires and werewolves on top of my regular duties. People whisper all the time. Mere breezes. If you want to crack heads to fix your rep, be my guest."

"Why do you assume I'd use violence?"

Less shrugged imperceptibly. "I just have werewolves on the brain, I guess."

"Just because I'm friends with some of them doesn't mean I approve of their methods."

Less nodded. "Okay, noted."

Rey watched him for a moment. "Aren't you the slightest bit interested on how they found out what you being attacked, or me being shot??"

"Of course I am," Less responded. "I just don't think I can do much beyond what I've already told you. We didn't swear anyone to secrecy so anyone could have let the story slip and it snowballed. Or it could have been an impossible-to-track ghost looking over somebody's shoulder and whispering in someone's ear. There's too many possibilities. But like I said, I'll find out if Vicissitude has been talking out of turn, and organize a Duchy party to showcase Mira's new, completely sane identity."

"Okay," Rey said with a nod.

After Less left, Rey picked up her phone and sent Richard a text message saying "Rumor going around: Mira shot me, Less beat up at her place, she's gone crazy and dragging the rest of the motley with her. WK says dealing with it low on priorities. Not sure if it should be."

She sat for a moment, looking at her phone, then dialed Mira's number. She wanted to find out what, exactly, she'd said to Veridia, and if she'd be willing to talk to their Queen.

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Mira stared down the street, watching the taxi taking Amber away to be sure no one was chasing after her.

"If this is going to work, we need to keep moving," Chase told her quietly. "I can smell them. They're close."

Mira turned toward him and nodded once, then took off at a brisk pace to keep up with him as he jogged over to his motorcycle.

They'd left in a hurry after Chase told her that Pure were on their way to her apartment. Although the ward was up now, Mira wasn't ready to withstand a siege. Also, these wolves might not worry too much about causing a lot of collateral damage. They were in their enemy's territory, after all. They'd avoided the elevator and run down eleven flights of stairs, leaving Mira feeling wobbly and deciding she needed to work out more. Picking up jogging seemed like a good idea if she was going to spend so much time running from bad guys.

She couldn't just leave Amber there, however. Mira was very sensitive to the idea that her enemies might use her friends against her. So, they got her moving and in a cab with the idea that Mira and Chase would lead them away.

Chase jumped on his bike and it roared to life at his touch. Mira eyed it for a moment and Chase made an impatient gesture with his hand and handed her a helmet. She put it on and managed to wedge herself in behind Chase and the upright portion of his seat while he flipped down the passenger pegs. Mira put her feet down and grabbed onto Chase as he sent them hurtling down the road with a mechanical roar.

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No one answered Mira's phone, but Rey couldn't feel surprised at that. Mira's own phone was long gone and the one she currently possessed had been given to her by vampire kidnappers. If the vampires could intercept a 911 call, then it seemed reasonable they could track down a cell phone, as well. Hopefully, Mira had gotten rid of it.

Hoping everything was going all right, that they'd all have peace for one night, Rey went to bed.

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Less Seleman was awoken by insistent knocking on his door. He wasn't moving quite as quickly as he may have been since last night had been a late one. After leaving Rey's place, he'd begun planning. He'd wanted more information on the werewolves as well as the vampires, and so he'd made contact with the Wardens. Septimus received word of course, as well as any other Warden who might pick up a useful tidbit.

The clock told him it was just after six in the morning, and when he pulled himself together to check the door, he found Claire standing outside.

At the sight of his Wretched Doorward it was as if a cool summer breeze was blowing away the rain clouds. He hadn't realized how worried he had been for his operative and how much he missed the reassurance her presence gave him. But still, even before he invited her in and out of sight of prying eyes, there was protocol. He glanced up and down the hallway while he waited for her to initiate the passphrase.

"I have been told that donkey's milk closely resembles human breast milk," she said straight-faced.

"It is well-known for its medicinal properties," he replied automatically. "Cleopatra herself bathed in it."

With that out of the way, Less once again checked the hall, then quickly ushered her in.

"What news?" he asked. He offered her a seat and proceeded to put the kettle on.

"I was able to make contact with several of the witches and they seem to be quite welcoming. It may be a while before I'm allowed into the inner circle, but it's a start," she said. "I heard you recently had some excitement, including a summons for the Ghul of Autumn and instructions for Lyre prepare for some kind of Welcome Party for Spring. You must have little time for rest."

"Nothing much changes," Less admitted. "It will be a relief to have some information coming in regarding the witches. The fact that we cannot infiltrate the vampires and werewolves in the area have proven to be disastrous in the past few days." He related the stories involving Mira, and mentioned how the information had been rumoured out. "The werewolves are powerful but their motivations do not seem too complicated. I'm sure they can be managed. The vampires, on the other hand, have become extremely dangerous. Many groups have become aware of the Duchy and we are not prepared, or capable, of defending against them."

"We must rely on our ability to blend with humanity to protect us from them," Claire mused. "We might not be able to monitor these werewolves and vampires directly, but we'll need to watch those that these groups interact with. All it takes is one Ensorcellment to be abused and our whole existence is exposed."

"Hm, yes, I should probably get together with the other monarchs and discuss imposing a ban on such pacts with vampires and werewolves. It does offer a certain amount of control, however. The cat may be already out of the bag concerning our existence so some strategic alliances may be necessary. Where do the witches stand in all of this? How aware are they of the Duchy? Are they much involved with the other supernaturals?"

"I don't know how much the inner circle really knows, but my initial impression is that they don't know anything real. Paranoid legends, mostly inaccurate, are occasionally reinforced by an occasional unexplained incident just enough to keep belief going for those who want to believe. The lower ranks don't appear to have been ensorcelled, though I'm not taking any chances. The fact that Ishtar occasionally appears and does something amazing just blows their minds. They apparently buy everything she tells them."

"But she just tells them stories. That's good, but I'm sure the inner circle is much more aware." Less passed Claire a hot mug. "Are you managing your cover life okay? It must be hard to be cut off."

Claire sampled the tea and showed her appreciation with a smile. "It's not difficult. It requires a lot of energy to keep the Mask reinforced, but I'm not always in front of them. That could change, though. There are a couple of witches who own an occult store downtown. I had let slip I was between jobs so they offered me work there. I thought I might be able to earn trust more quickly if I could get close. If I take the job, then things might become a more interesting challenge."

"That seems like a good step. I will try to arrange for glamour resources for you." Less paused to think if he knew of a place where suitable goblin fruit was growing while he sipped at his tea. "We'll use the usual emergency contact procedures if you're feeling bad about the work situation. After what happened to Mira, I'm worried about mental domination - even the mundane brainwashing tactics that cults use. Stay alert for these sort of attempts, and try to find out if witches have anything to protect against it."

"Who's Mira?" Claire asked with a little more curiosity than usual.

"Mira is Mizuko. As a side-effect of the vampire re-programming Mizuko was left with the memories of a satisfying upbringing. So, instead of the naive girl we knew who grew up under a bush next to a lake we have a sophisticated woman. Mizuko decided her name, which means 'Water-Child', was no longer appropriate and re-named herself Mira." As a summary, he simply shrugged.

"That makes me wonder," Claire mused.

"You're not the only one."

"Well, what else might they have left in there? It sounds like a pretty sophisticated thing to do in a short period of time, but if they can modify personality in such a way that it doesn't drive a person mad, then what other compulsions might they have left behind? Or... *is she sane? Is she a danger to us?*"

"The whole thing is a complete mess," Less agreed. "Given that the person who returned her old memories was also a vampire, any assurances we have been given are suspect. I personally don't think she is insane or

a danger and I would appreciate any musings on the subject to not be made publicly. However, I have advised the Queen of Autumn that she should find herself a new Legate. I consider her a dear friend and motley-mate and will give her the benefit of the doubt, but I won't be involving her in Bleak Seal business. This is why I am putting the hunt for the vampires Xavier and Leopold top priority for the Wardens. In the course of your current mission, any involvement of the witches with vampires that might come to light should be brought to my attention as soon as it is safe to do so."

Claire nodded. "I'll do that. I suspect that any contact with real supernatural creatures by any witches not of the inner circle would be met by a lot of fear." She paused, then said, "Sir, about this change in your motley mate, Mira. Do you feel you may be in danger? Maybe we could put someone on her. At least to watch."

"No, our motley will take care of me and her. Besides, I'm sure Veridia keeps her under surveillance anyway."

"Yes, sir. I'm sure you are right. Please let me know if I can help with those vampires. Anyone who can completely brainwash a changeling in a single day is extremely dangerous."

"Agreed. Veridia is going to help fund an expansion of the Bleak Seal's informant network. We can't do anything until we find them, but I'll keep you informed on our progress."

Claire offered to shake Less's hand. "Stay safe, sir."

He took her hand and gripped firmly. "And you, Dub-Dee?. Take care."

Claire made her exit and Less was left in peace to begin his day.

When Rey headed out of the bathroom at 6:45 am Monday morning, she found Mira sitting at her kitchen table munching on some toast and drinking what smelled like some kind of herbal tea. The nymph looked up, put down the toast, and signed a good morning.

"Morning," Rey signed in return, a slight frown on her face as she looked at her friend.

Mira didn't look rested. In fact, the dark circles under her eyes looked like bruises now and she was too pale. A wide bandage covered the base of her neck. She was wearing v-necked long sleeve shirt with a heavy shawl over her shoulders which was unusual since the nymph usually had a rather high tolerance for even wintry cold.

"What happened?"

"After Aurra finished the wards," Mira signed, "Chase stopped by with a warning that werewolves were on their way. Chase said they wouldn't worry about not hurting my neighbors, so I sent Amber to some friends while he and I drew the pack away. I didn't want her hurt, used against me, or infected with lycanthropy. I managed to persuade him to take me to my pond, where I could draw upon my full strength. It was a trap — those wolves had anticipated that move." She shook her head and sighed.

Rey noticed she hadn't mentioned Drake in any of that. She also knew that people couldn't get infected with lycanthropy, but this was neither the time nor the place for that discussion. "What did they do?"

"There was a really big wolf waiting there and he jumped in front of the motorcycle. I jumped off, but Chase and the bike got slammed into a tree."

"Was he okay?" Rey asked quickly, concerned for him.

"Chase was alive last I saw him. It cost me," she touched a finger to the bandage, "but I was able to tell him to go for help, that I'd hold the werewolves at the pond as long as I could, then escape through the water to a place they couldn't reach me."

Mira's eyes looked far away as she remembered the scene. She had stood before the huge, monster wolf and spoke to it. It had taken every ounce of courage to do that. Not that she could have really run away; it had taken most of her concentration just to keep her legs from buckling and curling up in a ball out of sheer terror. Somehow, she'd stood her ground and spoke to the beast. It was only a minute or so and the rest of them showed up.

Mira shivered and focused on Rey. "I had to nearly drown the big one while I convinced them that they had to talk to me on even terms to save their friend. They didn't know that water-tentacle I'd called up out of the pond to cover the beast's head would fall apart if they took me down or dragged me too far away from the pond. They bought my bluff, thank god."

It had been a lie — something Mizuko would never have considered doing. Since the werewolves believed it, it must have been a very convincing one, too.

"What did you do?" Rey's voice had dropped to an almost whisper, and she couldn't shake the feeling of impending doom.

"I don't think those wolves would ever give up unless I gave them something. They are focused to the point of insanity on the idea that I can tell them their futures." Mira stopped signing. From the look on her face Rey knew. Mira had struck a bargain.

"What did you give them, Mira?"

"At first, I believed they were going to try to kill me. They couldn't, but they didn't know that. But I knew that if I left, if I escaped, they'd know what I could do and they'd go for some other kind of leverage. I had to let them think they had control of the situation. John apologized for the attack on Less and the others. He lost his temper and he felt bad about that. He said that his people were being hunted to extinction by hostile wolves like Chase and that all that were left of them were the four I saw there."

Mira remembered how John had spoken of the pain he'd gone through for his people, how it felt like his world had been shattered. He'd apologized for his affront at Glasshouse, admitting his lust for a beautiful woman had overridden his senses and that when he had first scented her, he couldn't get enough. As if she was an aphrodisiac. He had vowed to her that he would never again allow his drive to indulge his senses to overwhelm his good sense when it came to her person. His admissions had sounded stunningly familiar to her.

"And you believed him? That Chase was the hostile one?" Rey had to bite back a laugh.

"Of course I do. Chase isn't hostile to you or me, of course. We aren't his enemies. But John and his group are. What I related to you is how he related it to me."

"What else did he say?"

"He told me that people like me, mentally unstable and touched by the power of the Spirit World, often had powerful oracular gifts. I don't much like being called crazy, but he didn't say it in an offensive way. I'm not sure how to explain it. He wanted to make a deal with me. I tell him his future and promise never to reveal that to anyone else. I explained it wasn't that simple, that I could see a lot of things, but not specific time and place. I could only tell him what would happen in a time frame of the next several months, and that

whatever I did tell him is easily taken out of context. Or that even I don't necessarily know the context. Basically, I could tell him, but I wasn't going to interpret for him and I wasn't going to do it for nothing."

"How did he take that?"

Mira bit her lip as she remembered him telling her not to worry, that her powers would likely grow. She wasn't sure that was a good thing, at least where the werewolves were concerned. "Pretty well. He wants to strike a bargain, but since Chase went to get the Santa Fe Pack, John said he and his pack would, uh, catch up to me later. I tried to get him to give me means to get in touch with him, but I don't think he trusts me yet. He's right, anyway. If he gave me that, I'd have just told you and let your wolves destroy him. I don't owe him anything."

"You realize that if he doesn't get what he wants from you, if he can't control you, or if he decides you haven't been touched by the Spirit World, he'll kill you without any hesitation."

"That's partly up to your friends," Mira signed.

"What do you mean?"

"I'm not stupid. I'm going to do whatever I have to in order to stay alive," Mira said. "That means I want you to tell your wolf friends in Santa Fe that these guys are going to be looking to make contact with me. Tell them where I live and where I work. If they want a crack at these guys, there's a chance they could show up at one of those places as well as Ottowi Pond. I can change my movements such that it will be unlikely for anyone unable to enter the Hedge on their own to follow me for very far outside of these places."

"Alright," Rey said with a nod.

"If those places are watched by their enemies, they aren't going to try to make contact with me there. They might be pissed, but then I'm not going to be helping your friends by telling them their futures. I'm not going to be in contact with them at all, if I can help it, so that John and his friends won't just decide that I'm working for their enemies and launch a serious attack. That means there is just one place John is likely to pick me up, one place I can't get out of visiting. Glasshouse."

"A confrontation inside Glasshouse would result in lots of innocent people getting hurt," Rey said. "We have to make sure that doesn't happen." And getting Lyla into Mythic without starting that war with Ishtar would be problematic to say the least, if this goes down once Spring rules. "I'll see what I can do." She sighed. "This could really get out of hand very quickly. Vampires, werewolves and changelings, all in one place at one time, with the potential for violence."

Rey paused and her head tilted slightly to one side as she regarded her friend. "Why can't you get out of visiting there?"

"Ishtar."

"Why? What is she making you do?"

"In exchange for saving my life, I have to visit Glasshouse at least a couple times a week to spot any vampires or vampire activity there."

"For how long?"

"Until she decides I don't have to anymore. It kind of sucks to have a life debt to another changeling, but I'm alive so I'm not complaining."

Rey nodded, and grimaced when she saw the time. "Sorry, Mira, I need to get ready for work. If you want to crash here and sleep, go right ahead. There's food in the fridge too, if you're hungry."

Mira nodded. "If you don't mind. I used the Door to come over from the pond. I'd like to wait until you find out if your friends will be watching my apartment and work before I go home. I'm getting tired of being ambushed."

"I don't blame you." Rey walked over to the coffee maker and got a travel mug out of the cupboard. "How did things go with Drake?"

"He's not sure he likes me anymore," Mira signed. She stood still trying not to look upset and was glad Rey wasn't looking at her face.

"Really?" Rey turned around to look at Mira. "Did he actually come out and say those exact words?"

"He didn't have to. I could see it on his face. He said he liked how I was before. He also mentioned that if he thought all I wanted was sex, then he'd just drop me off at my apartment and he'd be on his way. Guess what happened?"

"I hate to say it, Mira, but you've not always been the best at reading people," Rey replied. "A lot of people are going to be wondering if you are really still you. Are you going to give him some time to adjust?"

"I don't know. I took the risk; I put my feelings out there. He knows how I feel about him, but he still left me there. It hurt."

"He's a grad student, right? It's Monday. He likely has classes today, or maybe he has to work. There's any number of legitimate reasons he dropped you off at home that have nothing to do with feelings."

"Oh, I know that," Mira said. "I don't expect him to stop his world to help me. He's done that once already and while I would have done the same for him if he were in danger or needed me, I don't expect that of him. Like I said, he doesn't know that he likes me as I am now." She stopped. "Wait. I know he teaches some classes at the university, but why do you think he is a grad student?"

"Anyone who's got an assistantship at a university has to be a graduate student," Rey replied with a shrug. "You can't teach at the university level unless you've got at least a Master's or are working toward a Doctorate."

"I see," Mira signed.

"Why did you quit as Legate?" It was a change of subject, but something Rey needed to find out about, if only for her own curiosity.

"I don't want to be someone else's puppet." The irony that she had quit when her will had been subverted wasn't lost on her, but she didn't regret it.

"Our Queen is concerned. She's afraid Leopold and Xavier turned you against her, and she said you threatened her."

"She could have taken it that way," Mira signed.

"What did you say to her?"

"Before or after I told her I quit twice?" Mira shook her head. "It wasn't easy to stand up to her, but I did. In the end I told her I quit three times and the last time I was frustrated enough to tell her that she needed to

accept that so neither one of us got hurt."

"If you'd said that to me, I'd have considered it a threat too," Rey said. "Have you talked to her since then?"

Mira wondered whose side Rey was on anyway. "You mean between getting my brains screwed over and running for my life all night?" Mira shook her head. "Anyway, yesterday, today, or a month of today, the answer will be the same. Hell. No. She'll screw with my head, too, and try to manipulate me just like she always does. No way am I getting in a room alone with her. Look, she broke the pledge and then tried to enforce it on me anyway. She deserves a lot worse than what she got."

Rey held up her hands in front of her as if fending Mira off. "Hey, don't get angry with me. I don't know nothing about any pledges or deals you'd made with her. I'm just trying to figure out what's going on. She very angry, so much so I'm afraid she's going to snap and when she does, it's going to be bad for all of us." She lowered her hands. "I'm not saying you have to become the Legate again. But the way you resigned, and the circumstances, could it have been handled better? Pissing off the ruler of our Court is not wise."

"At the time, I had a little encouragement to do it," Mira signed. "Honestly, it didn't take much to make me see it for what it was, but I'd probably have said it differently had I not been in that situation."

"What was the pledge?"

Mira settled for giving Rey the gist. "Essentially, in exchange for her protection, I would be her voice."

"Protection from everything?" Rey asked. That seemed to be an overly broad promise, something that could never be successfully done.

Mira shook her head. "Everything for which she had reasonable means. Give her some credit — she's no dummy. Where she failed in her promise was when she threatened my life. That is something she has complete control over and is therefore a clear violation of agreement, even just to threaten it."

Rey almost asked when Veridia had threatened her life, then remembered the events surrounding Veridia's discovering Mizuko's relationship with Remy. "If she agreed, if she swore to give you some measure of autonomy in carrying out the duties of the Legate, would you take up that role again?"

Mira thought about it, then shook her head again. "I don't think so. Being Legate means you also get a target on your back and the regular visits by ghosts I can't see but can hear. I have enough parties interested in me right now, and not in a good way."

"I think, then, that it might be a good idea to make sure the Queen knows there are reasons other than what she has done that are preventing you from becoming the Legate again," Rey said. "It will be difficult, though. Less has already advised her to seek another to serve as Legate, but she's having problems accepting that. Listening to her talk last night, she cares for you as if you were her own daughter. She does want to protect you, and given what happened with the previous Legate, and the loss of her sister in that final battle with the Goblin King, her attempts to control you are the same actions an overprotective parent would take. I'm not saying she was right to do it, but it's an explanation for her behavior."

Mira considered her response. "Maybe. I don't know. I'm not sure I could trust a parent who would kill their children if they thought they were influenced by vampires. I don't want to live with the sword of Damocles hanging over my neck. I'm not altogether convinced she wouldn't have tried to have me killed if the motley and a bunch of friendly allies weren't at the pond the moment she realized a vampire had messed up my memories. She's lost my trust, so if I'm that important to her she can make the first move. I'm not going to risk my life trying to make nice."

"I think she's been trying. She said she's been sending you messages and you've been ignoring them. I'd

have to say she is making the first move."

Mira looked puzzled. She hadn't heard from a ghost since before Friday night.

"Perhaps you might consider calling her to find out what's been happening to the messages," Rey said. "She could have been calling your old cell phone, not realizing you no longer have it. You can use my phone, if you'd like."

Mira gave Rey an 'are you serious' look. "I haven't slept in two days, this has not been a good weekend, and I'm still mad at her."

"Then go take a nap. I've got to get ready for work." Rey sipped her coffee as she walked into the bathroom to shower. When she was at work, she thought, she'd call Veridia and let her know Mira wasn't ignoring her; she hadn't received any of the queen's messages.

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Less's Monday went as it typically did for a workday, though he had plenty on his mind to occupy his thoughts during the many quiet times throughout the day.

Once evening arrived and the Winter King left the train station, he received word from his spy net on the topic of the unfortunate rumors. It seems that by now most changelings of the Duchy had heard the rumor. Not everyone took it at face value, but few dismissed the possibility of an insane Legate out of hand. Specifically, few believed that Mizuko had personally attacked the Winter King, because everyone expected something like that would have immediate consequences — or at least consequences everyone would hear about from official sources sooner or later. There was a rumor that the Legate had lost her mind and shot the Witch of the Bitter Wind, but a counter rumor had already started going around saying that it was patently false and that the Witch hadn't been shot at all. Overall, the rumors were a conflicted mishmash of mostly false information. The only one that appeared to have any relation in fact, and very few people knew it yet, was that the Legate had indeed resigned.

It proved impossible to pin down the origin of the rumors. No one wanted to admit to spreading it should it be both damaging and false.

More time on the part of the Wardens was spent in an attempt to track down the vampires responsible for Mizuko's abduction. (Most were not yet cognizant that Mira had since changed her name.) They'd already run into a dead end in terms of tracking who owned the house that was visited Saturday night. The house was apparently owned by the elderly couple and always had been. That meant only they might know anything about the vampire, but it had already been discovered they were fanatically loyal even if they did know anything true or substantial. The Wardens wouldn't give up any time soon; the dead end just meant they might have to rely on old-school surveillance.

When Less arrived at his apartment again in the waning light of the late winter sun, he encountered Mira. She was sitting on a bench in front of his building shivering a little in the icy cold under the inadequate warmth of a heavy shawl while she read a magazine. That in itself wasn't surprising given it was a cold day. But the ice nymph had never shown any particular vulnerability to cold before, even when wearing light jackets or none at all in winter. Absorbed as she was in the article, she didn't hear Less approach.

Less, used to sliding by unnoticed, read a few lines of the article over her shoulder before stepping back out of arm's reach. He didn't want to be within striking range if he startled her. "Mira," he said softly to attract her attention to him. "What a pleasant surprise."

The magazine appeared to be another women's monthly that promised to reveal mens' secrets. This particular article was hogwash and Less could tell from just the few lines he caught. It was titled 21 things

men want to talk about after sex. On the other hand, she may have been looking at the ad, which featured an attractive woman modeling a designer ensemble.

She looked up quickly. "Oh!" Mira smiled and then signed, "Hi Less." She stood up a little stiffly and set down the magazine. The movement revealed a large bandage at the base of her neck, under the shawl. "I was hoping I might see you. I know it's early to ask, but I was wondering if your people had made any progress in locating Leopold?"

Less shook his head and signed back, "Not yet. It's early days and intelligence gathering is a slow process. We're swamped with recruiting new eyes and ears, sifting through news items and monitoring police radio. Until we get a solid lead we're just feeling in the dark." He folded the latest run of *The Crescent*, a tabloid claiming to present the truth about the unexplainable, and gestured to his building. "Do you want to come in? You look cold...and hurt. What happened to your neck?"

Mira accepted his invitation and followed Less inside. Once in his apartment, she explain, "Werewolves caught up to me." She then went on to explain the same story she told Rey. She concluded with, "So I was sleeping in Rey's guest room all day until just a little while ago. When I woke up I realized I remembered some details about Xavier's people that I thought might be helpful for the search."

She told him that some of this came from the little that she saw first hand, but most of it were from memories of someone called Ellie. Xavier knew the mind of this particular mortal very well and it was Ellie's memories that she tapped, consciously or not, in many ways. In fact, Mira admitted, it was a struggle to maintain the balancing act between the naive personality she had as Mizuko (from the neo-Ellie personality's perspective) and the slavishly aggressive neo-Ellie personality (from the Mizuko perspective).

Less could tell that Mira herself was the outcome and he had the insight to guess that she was finding as time goes on that she was forced to choose from behaviors that Xavier put in her mind and old habits. From what he saw, she was choosing the more aggressive personality most of the time. It would make sense that the aggressive personality would be more dominant in her mind, but the fact it was built to serve vampires was worrying.

These insights were rapidly analyzed and stored in the spymaster's mind while Mira told him vital information regarding Xavier's servants.

"Ellie is the one I know best," Mira told him in Glymjack sign. "She has blonde hair and blue eyes. She's very attractive and works hard to keep fit through diet, which is a little redundant. Xavier keeps her fed on vampire blood, which is extremely addictive but will also preserve a mortal's physical form. I think it's out of habit, but she special orders her dietary foods on a monthly basis. She is also sexualized. I think that means Xavier has made a habit of rewarding her with vampire blood whenever she behaves seductively. But I think she'd behave that way regardless — it's kind of a matter of professional pride. She gets really jealous if someone manages to seduce someone she couldn't. Like dangerously jealous, and Xavier likes her that way. He wanted me to be like that, too. Ellie is also supernaturally tough."

"Of the remaining three, I know Ray best. He's the male counterpart to Ellie. He's got moves - a wrestler - and is freakishly strong. I only knew him one night and I know that when he wanted to keep hold of me, I wasn't going anywhere. I'm not sure calling on the elements would even help. He's that good. I think his strength may be supernaturally gifted to him due to his bond with Xavier.

"And he loves to make people hurt. He gets off on it. He can grab you and put you in a wrist lock before you know what's going on. He can pop your shoulder out of your socket and make you hurt like nothing ever hurt so bad before, and then make you feel grateful when he ends the pain. Xavier uses him to break people's will. You don't want to be in his hands if he decides he's going to hurt you.

"Between Ray and Ellie, Xavier has some highly specialized talents. I think Xavier is pervert that uses Ellie

and Ray to produce mind-warped slaves for the amusement of other vampires. He probably does a lot of other things such as cover-ups, but producing servants has to be a lucrative trade for him. Sex and addiction are powerful tools and then added to brainwashing?" Mira shivered. "Look for some kind of supernatural trade. They won't use any words like 'slave' or 'kidnapping' anything that sounds illegal, but that's what the end result is, even if someone is suckered into it willingly."

Mira continued. "The other two I don't know very well, but I have a few of Ellie's impressions of them. Whereas Ellie and Ray are damaged goods, the other two are fanatical bodyguards. Jonas is a sadist. He has the attitude of a high school jock, but the physical skill to back it up. He's deadly with pistols and likes to shoot people and he's really tough. He's worked for Xavier for a long time. Decades. He's a lot older than he looks. Becka is probably the least unbalanced of the group. She strong enough to handle two pistols at once and has the skill to hit something with them both at once. But she's also subtle and sneaky. I don't know if you can use what I recall about Jonas and Becka. They both have brown hair and brown eyes and don't stand out. They tend to blend into the scenery."

Less mulled over what Mira had told him for a while. "This will certainly help. You don't have any memories of a place they might go, do you? Right now we've got to sift through information from everywhere. Even narrowing down the country would help. Do they speak other languages?"

"I'm not sure. I assume Spanish," Mira signed. "Ellie was an EMT, I think, before Xavier found her. No one had accents or used a foreign language in front of me. Maybe that means that they were all more or less local?" Mira paused to think, then signed, "I don't know where they got that special equipment."

"What special equipment?" asked Less. "Do you mean the phone jamming stuff that blocked Rey's phone call?"

Mira looked a little surprised. "Oh. Yes, I imagine that's probably specialized stuff. Though if it's electronic then parts might be ordered and shipped from anywhere. No, I'm talking about the hardware they used in... ah. Well, Ellie and Ray are into rope-work and suspension. That requires some heavy duty frames that are pretty specialized. They might even be custom built by somebody. Maybe you can find out who makes that stuff?"

Less tried to imagine what Mira was talking about. "Heavy duty rope-work and suspension? What, like bridges?"

Mira laughed a little at that. "No. They like to tie people up or each other for pleasure or pain or both. They get kind of fancy with it, but it requires various types of frames strong enough and stable enough to hold a person, even if they struggle or swing around. Ellie considers it a kind of art because the rope work gets pretty fancy. Ray just thinks it's kinky and he's into that. I could show you the rope work side sometime if you like. I remember the knots."

Leopold might just be a dirty old vampire, but Xavier did things for a reason. He'd given her knowledge of all that rope work and she felt sure it was for a purpose. But what?

"So, it's possible that Xavier's mortal groupies might still be in town even if the vampire has skipped town. Tracking bondage equipment will probably just give me the clientele list of the Blood Tears club, but it's the best lead I've got so far. It must be hard for you to deal with these memories copied from another woman. I wonder what Ellie think of it."

"I'm not sure she's aware. I don't have everything — just memories that had to do with certain skills he wanted me to have. I think."

Mira added, "Anyway, you might be able to narrow things down further if you don't worry about everyone who might have that stuff. What about people who make it? It could be home built stuff. But what if there is

a local craftsman that custom builds this stuff? We could see if Xavier Klein's name is on his client list."

"Yeah, I'll check it out. In the meantime, you've been through a lot in the past couple of weeks. Is there anything I can do for you?"

Mira thought about it. "Helping to hunt down these jerks is a big help. I'm also having trouble with those werewolves, and you already got hurt once because of them. They caught up to me last night. I was able to draw them away from my apartment to keep Amber safe, but there was a bit of a scuffle when at my pond. They have someone watching that place. I have this to remember it by," she touched the large bandage at the base of her neck.

"I'm going to have to deal with them at this rate. They are determined I should be their pet oracle. I told them I wouldn't do it for free and the meeting was cut short since Rey's wolf friends were on the way. I expect they'll catch up to me again soon, but I want to give Rey's wolves a chance to run into them and either thin them out or get rid of them. If they can't, then I'll make a deal with the ones pressuring me. I don't believe they can change their futures anyway, so it's not worth risking my life over this just to be stubborn. Rey has a different opinion and she'll be more pissed at me than she already is."

"So, my plan is to put on a bit of a show at the pond. Make sure that whoever they have watching the pond will see me disappear there. That way they'll have to watch for me in the park, which is a better place for Rey's friends to ambush them. Then I'll remain in our Hollow for a while, long enough to give this time to work. But I don't know how this will work with your plans. Do you need me as bait to draw the vampires back into the open? I figure Leopold or his allies still have plans for me and I might be your best chance to draw them out of hiding. What do you think?"

"No, I won't need you for tracking down the vampires at the moment. It's best just to gather information the old-fashioned way than risk tipping them off with actual contact. The werewolves are Rey's thing and I'm just following her lead there. I will arrange for some 'Coyote Sighted In Area' signs to go up in the park just to try lessen the number of bystanders that might be in there when the confrontation does occur. Oh! I almost forgot. I'm planning a Spring Welcome party to bring together the Duchy once more before Winter goes out. I hope you'll be up and about by then."

Mira smiled as excitement shone in her eyes. "That sounds fun!" she signed. "Count me in. And if you need help with anything, I'll just be sitting around in the Hollow looking for things to do. Don't be afraid to ask."

"Sure! I'll let you know once it gets moving. I'm going to let Squire Lyre manage the details, but I was thinking of lots of melting ice sculptures and blooming flowers."

Impressed, Mira predicted, "Ice sculptures? Your party will be the best!"

"Of course!"

Mira bid him a good night, and intended to head out to Ottowi Pond where she figured a werewolf watcher might try to pick up her trail, and where she intended to lose them via the Door at the bottom of the small lake.

Before she left, however, Less's phone rang. It was Lyre. He told him that the Ghul of Autumn had heard he wanted to speak with her. He gave the Winter King the number of a phone booth at which she was currently waiting for his call.

Less shook his head in annoyance. He understood the Ghul's need to remain at large but this seemed like a deliberate slight on his office. Also, considering the sensitivity of the topic of their discussion he did not want to have it over an unsecured line. He took out his anger on the buttons of his phone as he dialled.

She answered right away. "Hullo, this is Viscissitude."

"We need to discuss business."

"Yes, I just heard a little bit ago that you wanted to see me. Veridia has had me out tracking down some information on 'Vs' so I've been out of touch. Is there a place you wanted to meet so we can speak more freely?"

"Then most of this might be review but meet me at the 13th street market. Sweet dreams!" By meeting in the Hedge it hopefully secured them against being overheard by other supernaturals. He hoped Vicissitude understood his veiled hint to meet him in the market district where they bought and sold dreams in brightly coloured bottles.

—

Rey's morning was the usual madhouse, with the added attraction of dealing with a C-list celebrity who pitched a fit when things weren't exactly the way he wanted them (despite the fact the staff had followed his written directions to the letter). On her lunch break - which consisted of the fifteen minutes she was able to avoid her assistant - she wolfed down a sandwich and placed a call to Ishtar's message service. Rey simply said she needed to speak with the Emerald Queen about a mutual acquaintance from New Hampshire.

The rest of her day yielded no unexpected surprises, and when the clock showed half past five, Rey was walking out the door into the parking garage toward her car.

Once at home, she kicked off her shoes as she called Veridia while walking into the kitchen to get herself a drink. Someone answered for the Queen and the call was transferred.

"Yes?" Veridia answered. Her tone was less charged with dangerous energy — an improvement over the last time Rey had spoken with her.

"Good evening, my Queen," Rey replied. "I spoke with Mira earlier today. When I told her of your attempts to contact her, she was genuinely surprised. She had no idea you had tried."

"That can only mean something scared away my ghosts," Veridia said. "Or destroyed them."

"There is another possibility," Rey said. "She may have been in a location that has been warded against ghosts."

"Do you know something?" Veridia pressed.

"Mira now has wards on her apartment. Against vampires and werewolves are my guess, but I don't know if the apartment has been warded against anything else," Rey replied honestly. "Given the events of the past few days, her interest in security has increased significantly."

"How did she manage to get wards in place?"

"Made a deal with a witch, I suspect," Rey answered with a shrug, though Veridia couldn't see the gesture.

"Can you tell me anything about the wards? What it took to put them in place? How effective they are?"

"I'm afraid I can't. I don't know any of the details."

Veridia sighed. "All right. Is there anything else?"

"Not at the moment," Rey said.

"All right, thanks for letting me know," Veridia told her.

Rey blinked at her words but continued as if nothing had happened and ended the call with the usual pleasantries. She grabbed a beer from the fridge and brought it with her into her bedroom where she changed out of her work clothes.

—

Less was at the 13th Street Market and standing in front of Dream Row — the place where dreams could be bought and sold. One man's nightmare was another woman's dream as they called out on the Row.

Sissy was there as well. Less watched as she emerged from shadows between a couple stalls. Her skill in remaining stealthy was impressive, but not even the Ghul had noticed the Winter King's arrival. Vicissitude looked up and down the street, obviously looking for someone.

Less was right beside the Autumn assassin before he said, "Walk with me." The clamour of the market would cover their conversation.

Sissy fell in beside him and did her best to ignore the fabulous wares and promises the vendors were offering them as they walked.

"Your queen has already briefed you that the Duchy currently has a problem with some vampires and werewolves in the area. She has pledged your service to me to solve this problem. One vampire in particular named Xavier Klein has powerful mind-altering abilities. Changelings seem to have very little defence against this. Mizuko was taken and brainwashed, and Rey was shot trying to prevent it. We have, after much trouble, returned Mizuko's memories to her but much of the false back story that was implanted into her remains. The result is that she is no longer naive nor awkward in mortal or changeling society and so she has chosen Mira as her new name to signify this. I tell you all this to emphasize how dangerous this vampire is. Finding him is my - and Queen Veridia's - top priority but when I do I need you to be ready to destroy him. Septimus Snow will provide you with all we know about vampires and hopefully Autumn can provide you with more. Septimus will also brief you in communication protocols. I will communicate with you in secret signs and message drops. Memorize the procedures. Be ready to act. Do you have any questions?"

"I'm anticipating your network will produce information faster than Lydia and I can using our... supernatural means. The fact is that I'm Veridia's assassin and Lydia is her executioner. We appreciate all the intel you've given me just now and any you can provide in the future. When you have a location and a target, Lydia and I will be ready to act. If it's possible to kill these vampires, we'll find a way to do it," Sissy promised.

"But I do have a question. Those vampires won't be standing still. Mira may be compromised, and they have to know we know it, too. They have to know we are looking for them. So, I expect they will be looking for us, too. If things get sticky for your people — and by that I mean your investigators as well as your motley since they have been targeted already, will you let me know? Or my queen. We have our own safe houses and defenders that are able to provide protection. I'd suggest Summer or Spring as well, but... well they aren't well known for keeping secrets, but I think our queen is willing to agree with whoever you decide to bring in."

"If things get sticky, then we know we're close. I will pass the information to you as soon as possible. I am keeping this between us for now for secrecy. Once contact is made, I can choose to bring in Spring and

Summer."

Vicissitude nodded, accepting of his decision.

"As to the matter of the werewolves. A small group attacked Mira's apartment, where I happened to be. They are powerful fighters and I was lucky they only wanted to send a message to Mira. They are looking to tap her visionary powers. Luckily, there is a rival werewolf pack that the Witch of the Bitter Wind is negotiating with to deal with our problem. I do not expect that you will be required to get involved in this but you should be aware of their proximity considering both the vampires and werewolves are targeting Mira."

Sissy was silent for a moment while she made a decision. "About Mizuko, the old Mira. I'd like to bring something up, if you don't mind."

"Please do."

"I wouldn't usually bring this kind of thing up with you, but some things have gotten out of hand and I want you to know that I've had nothing to do with this," Sissy began. "Back when Mizuko first arrived and joined the Autumn Court I didn't think she was worthy of us. She was incapable of representing what Autumn stood for; experienced, wise in the ways of the occult and knowledgeable of the mysteries of the Hedge. Instead, she was naive, introverted, and didn't seem to know anything about how to interact in a society. But yet she was gorgeous and got the personal attention of the most important people of the Ashen Court. At first I picked on her and tried to get her to quit, but she stuck with it. Then, seeing she wasn't going anywhere, I gave up on that. I was still jealous of her, but I wanted her to improve. Grow up, you know? I was hard on her, but I never said anything that wasn't true. I wanted her to take a hard look at herself and really become the person that Veridia and her sisters knew she could become. At some point I realized I didn't hate her; I felt sorry for her. From a social point of view Mizuko was kind of an idiot savant. Talented and powerful, but clueless at the same time.

"Veridia has always been very watchful of her. Not really overprotective but wary. Mizuko was hard to predict. So after I was made Ghul, she had me watch her new Legate. A lot. Well, whenever I wasn't sent to track down some hobgoblin or other monster. I could tell she was growing as a person in some ways, but she was still naive. I could see that Veridia was totally just using her as a sock puppet. I didn't envy Mizuko's looks or the attention her abilities got her after that. After watching her pretty closely I figured I wouldn't wish her life on my worst enemy. Used by her own people, probably used by that Remy and his people, which were her only other friends outside of your motley, I figured her for a lost cause, really.

"If she was a lost soul already, then last weekend was hell. You know all that a whole lot better than me. The point I'm trying to make, is that it wasn't me bad-mouthing her. Rumors going around that she's nuts and likely to take down her motley too? That's just crazy bad form. Saying she's shooting her friends? And I imagine there's been worse. I haven't been around Iron Mountain much lately." Vicissitude shook her head. "I don't lie. I don't have to lie. Nor have I so much as repeated the rumor, save for right now to you. If you are curious who is going after your motley-mate and by extension your entire motley, I'd look for someone who is crazy jealous and pissed enough to spout downright lies. I don't know who is doing it, and I don't want to point fingers at anyone because I haven't spent any time looking into this at all, but I'd suggest that if a person wanted to find out who was doing this, they might want to start at the top of the enemies list, of those within the Duchy. Maybe rivals in Spring or Summer. Or say, she and the Summer warrior Drake were seen to be a couple at the last Duchy event. Drake's a gorgeous guy — maybe there is some jilted lover trying to get him back, or some secret admirer who doesn't like competition. I don't know, though. It's just a thought."

Less was silent for some time, embarrassed by his past persecution of the woman. "I appreciate you telling me your side of the story. Mira does seem to have an endless list of secret admirers. Thank you for your information. I haven't managed to find the source of the rumour just yet, but this might help focus my search. Is there anything you need? Some identification or weapon permits, maybe?"

She shook her head. "No, I'm good thanks."

Vicissitude's had been self-conscious about telling her story to the Winter King and had avoided looking at him. When Less realized the conversation was coming to a close he fell back perhaps a half step. It was enough to be out of her line-of-sight. With nothing further to the conversation, he wheeled down a side alley. The mantle of Winter wrapped around him and he vanished into the crowd of hobs.

He was already dialling his cell phone when he stepped off a little-known trod into the mortal world. "Get me everything there is to know about the Summer swordsman Drake."

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Eight o'clock came and went without Ishtar returning Rey's call. Dressed in jeans and a shirt, topped with her favorite jacket, Rey made her way to the Iron Mountain Hollow. She wanted to give Ishtar the benefit of the doubt, that whoever may have taken the message hadn't passed it along.

The great Hollow was mostly empty. Her footsteps echoed in unfamiliar ways as she journeyed toward the Spring Court's chambers. Stopping near the door to the gardens, familiar from its use as an infirmary after the Goblin King's attack, Rey spotted the succubus, Honey, leaning against the wall filing her black, claw-like nails.

"Good evening, Honey," Rey said with a friendly smile. "How are you this evening?"

"Bored and tired of standing here," Honey said. "What brings you to the Gardens tonight?"

"I was hoping to find the Emerald Queen," Rey replied. "There is something I need to speak with her about."

"She's been asleep all day. I'll see if she's up yet." Honey knocked twice on the heavy, oak door and green lines of knot work glowed to life for a moment. Then she opened the door and went inside, closing it behind her. Rey was left to wait a couple minutes before Honey returned.

"Good news. Sleepyhead is up. Give her about five minutes and then go on in." With her queen up and about, her duties were done. Honey happily wished Rey a good night and headed off down the hall toward the nearest exit.

Rey waited a bit longer than five minutes, then opened the door and entered the room. She found Ishtar in the center of the brightly lit gardens surrounded by her treasured greenery. The queen was seated on a bench that, padded with leafy foliage, looked as comfortable as any couch. The red-skinned Queen of Spring looked up at Rey as she approached.

"Good evening, Queen Ishtar," Rey said. "I wonder if I might speak with you about a mutual acquaintance from New Hampshire. Lyla Claireborne."

The queen looked at her and sighed. "And I was having such a nice morning. Or whatever time it is." Ishtar made a small motion which Rey took as permission to enter.

"I was wondering if you might consider lifting your ban, and allow Lyla to enter Mythic City," Rey said as she moved closer to Ishtar.

"Why would I do that?"

"There are several reasons," Rey replied, "but I believe there are two which are immediately relevant. First, there is a pack of werewolves, those who call themselves the Pure, who have territory in Mythic, and they

are currently hunting Mira, the name by which Mizuko now wishes to be known. Lyla's pack will help deal with this problem, but they will not be as effective if Lyla cannot enter the city. And second, Lyla should no longer be considered a threat to the Duchy."

"Interesting you are able to make such assessments for the Duchy," Ishtar said. "But back up a moment. Why are these werewolves hunting the Legate?"

"They believe she is an oracle, and wish to... negotiate with her for her services. I do not believe it is much of a stretch to think they would try to use her in their efforts to gain some measure of revenge for the war Lyla and her mate Chaska led against them." Rey came to a stop about five feet from Ishtar. "If they do not get what they want, or if they decide she is an abomination, then they will kill her."

"I imagine so." Ishtar looked Rey up and down, taking her measure. Whatever conclusion she came to didn't show on her face. "Maybe you should consider approaching the problem from a different angle. If the Legate were to present the problem as a threat to the Duchy, considering she does hold an official office here, instead of a personal problem, then the Duchy would be obligated to defend itself, would it not? Surely that would be a better solution than begging a third party to assist in a personal problem. There's no telling what kind of price that might exact of her — and you."

"It would depend upon who the third party would be," Rey said calmly. "Queen Veridia and the Winter King are aware of the situation and are taking steps towards a solution to the problem. However, the Pure pack will not sit idly by while they work, so I am trying working to put into play the resources I have. I do not consider asking the Storm Front pack for help to be begging. If it's of their alpha's interest to help, then they will. If not, then they won't, and there is little that can dissuade Chaska to change his mind once it he's made a decision. They will help, but they will not enter Mythic if it will start the war you promised should Lyla enter the city."

"So the pack will not act without her?"

"If you're asking if they will come into Mythic without her, then no, they might not," Rey said. "If they do, they'll be at a big disadvantage. Not only is Lyla their best hunter, but none of the pack's hunters and trackers have entered Mythic because of your edict. They'd be heading blind into Pure territory, which will mean a vicious, very bloody battle. It could easily spill over and affect anyone around them."

Ishtar shrugged. "Mythic isn't their territory anyway. Surely all the packs of Mythic aren't after Mira? What about the Heartrippers, Storm Chasers and Death Dancers? All three of these are practically my next door neighbors. As I understand it, any of them would be happy to take a shot at the Pure."

"Perhaps," Rey said with a slight nod, "but I have no contact with them. With no "official" introduction, my just showing up on their doorstep saying hi, I know who you are and want to chat wouldn't exactly go over very well."

Ishtar smiled. "Yes, they take their privacy seriously. As should we. You haven't explained to my satisfaction why this should not be a Duchy matter. If werewolves threaten the Legate of Autumn, I would think that it would behoove Autumn to take exception to that. I will tell you now that if my Spring courtiers were threatened in such a way, I would have the threatened changeling sequestered safely here while I prepare to teach the pack a lesson."

Ishtar gathered her force of personality and leveled it at Rey, letting silence stretch a moment and giving Rey time to let her anger at Ishtar's rebuke cool. "Now," she began again quietly. "If I might make a constructive suggestion, I think you should consider herding these Pure werewolves out of the city. You are of the Court of Fear. Use it. Scare them like nothing they've experienced. Chase them into Lyla's loving embrace if you choose or destroy them yourselves. Use silver and rifles if need be. If an entire pack is destroyed for hunting one changeling, then any others who might know what they were doing will be well warned. Or if

bloodshed is not to your taste, then simply move the Legate. Surely your Court has more than adequate resources for that. Your motley definitely does. The Legate can disappear and reappear elsewhere in the city if she wants."

"I appreciate your advice," Rey replied honestly, then continued, her own voice soft and her tone reasonable. She knew her next words could well put her in immense trouble. "There is still the matter of the ban you have placed on Lyla. I know why you did it." Her voice was soft and her tone reasonable. "I do not believe she is on the same path as she was when you last saw her. But even if she was, I have faith you are capable of dealing with her should the need arise."

"I'm not so sure it matters what she chooses for herself. She is not like you and I. And even if she could change her course, what's to say she wouldn't reverse her decision later? Is it responsible to put the entire Duchy in danger based on the hope that she will make the right choices?"

"Are you prepared to go to war with her pack and their allies?" Rey asked in return. "Because sooner or later, she *will* come into Mythic. She and Chaska led the war to wipe the Pure out in this area, and because she can't come into Mythic, the city has become a power vacuum, and a safe haven for the Pure to rebuild. From what she told me, there are too few Forsaken left to prevent the Pure from reestablishing themselves here. She respects your authority and power, but she won't wait forever." She didn't know what else she could say to convince Ishtar there is a problem the ban posed.

Ishtar's eyes burned a fierce emerald. "This is why religious inter-faction warfare is so dangerous. Fanatics running around saying they're true to Luna, or we're the really pure werewolves. Ridiculous argument, no better than what mortals come up with as excuses to kill themselves." She smiled enough to show teeth. There wasn't any mirth in it. "Yet, I'd be lying if I didn't say I didn't relish it in a way. That it didn't give me power.

"Unfortunately, my portfolio of love and war has to be balanced by what the Duchy can afford. And it cannot afford another war. If Lyla is so determined to fight these wolves hunting your Legate, then she will have to make sacrifices. I will *not* rescind the banishment. But I will bend. An exception will be made if I am notified where she is and what she is doing within the acknowledged bounds of the Duchy. If I am deceived, then when I find her in places she is not to be, I will punish her myself. If she resists, I will kill her. Lyla accepts this agreement when she steps foot in my city."

Rey thought for a moment. "I will tell her," she said, making sure to remember the specific wording.

"Then I'll consider the matter settled."

Rey nodded. "There is one final thing, something personal to me. My sister, Marie Lafitte, is one of your priestesses and I have been introduced to some members of her coven. She knows I am a witch, and has indicated she and the others might welcome me should I choose to... hang out with them from time to time. Would you object if I were to do so?"

"I don't mind, so long as you are respectful of them. I used to be a witch, you know. Before the Goblin King interfered with my life. I'm very protective of them."

"I understand," Rey said with a little smile of relief. "And it was just after 8:15 pm when I arrived here at Iron Mountain, if you were interested."

Ishtar frowned. "That late. I guess I was exhausted."

"You didn't think you were?" Rey asked with concern, the words out of her mouth before she could stop them.

"Working in dreams is unexpectedly tiring because you think you are asleep and resting, but you aren't. You can lay there all weekend apparently sleeping but if you spend all your time with dreamworks, then you are going to sleep Monday away, like I did." Ishtar smiled.

Rey nodded in understanding. "Dreamworking is a skill I am slowly remastering," she admitted, wondering whose dreams Ishtar was shaping.

Ishtar read her face and laughed quietly. "You want to do it with those who've pledged themselves to you. Such as your motley or in my case, my witches. By devoting themselves to me and honoring me in the ways I have asked, I gain a great deal of power. As you might gain power by harvesting emotion or finding goblin fruit, I also gain power through the act of worship, regardless of emotion.

"But I don't sit back and grow fat on it. I use it to fulfill my promise to protect them. I do this in part by entering their dreams to teach, heal, help them relieve stress, and watch for any sign of intrusion by outside forces. I also weave powerful dreams for them and imbue athames, small statues representing one of Ishtar's aspects, or the like with special dreams and Contracts. In this way, even those witches who have no power to protect themselves can be rewarded for their faith and hard work with real, tangible power and a way to protect themselves.

"My witches are strong, independent women and this is how I protect them from a dangerous and often predatory supernatural world; I empower them with the ability to protect themselves. Those with power I can still teach, for I was a very powerful witch once and I have a lot to share. Those without power, I can grant powers of their own. By using dreams as my vehicle each witch I contact can have a very personal relationship with their goddess with tangible benefits. And thus, with my power behind them, any of my witches may have a very unpleasant surprise indeed waiting in store for creatures that would hunt them."

"Can all your witches see through the Mask?"

"No."

Rey nodded. Good to know, she thought. "Those who can don't quite believe Marie and I are sisters, let alone twins." She glanced down at the watch on her wrist. "I have taken up enough of your time, Queen Ishtar. I appreciate your willingness to speak with me about Lyla, and your suggestions regarding the Pure pack."

"Good luck, Rey Lafitte."

It was going on ten at night when Rey pulled up in front of the house that looked like it came straight out of a New Mexico redneck's wet dream. Lyla's "little adobe hut" sat in the midst of an acre or more of overgrown, unkempt land littered with a jumbled collection of cars and motorcycles, a perfect match for the run-down exterior of the buildings. The church across from the main house didn't look to be in much better condition, and it wore its age heavily.

The Fairest was glad she'd taken Lyla's advice and worn boots; she wouldn't be surprised if there were a rattler or two - or two dozen - hiding out between the drive and the front door. Rey slipped out of her car and locked the door behind her out of habit, though she didn't engage the alarm system. She made her way toward what she thought was the most direct path to the house's front door.

A teenaged girl in faded jeans with worn out knees and shoulder-length red hair that looked like it hadn't seen a brush all day greeted her at the door. When Rey announced who she was to there to see, she yelled

for Lyla over her shoulder, then sauntered back over to a large couch seated in the middle of vast room. A big TV stood proudly on its hardwood stand.

Lyla arrived looking irritable and wearing a stained white apron over a short dress. It was an awkward-looking combination. She dried her hands and yelled over the sound of the blaring TV. "Shoes off the couch, Kim." A pair of thumps answered as Kim pulled off her shoes and dropped them on the floor.

Rey bit back a laugh, finding the scene incredibly amusing - and so not what she'd ever expected to see. "Hi, Lyla," she said instead, keeping her eyes on her friend.

Lyla beckoned Rey to follow with a crooked finger and they journeyed through the house. It led them past a musty-smelling washroom with an industrial-sized washer and drier. Lyla wrinkled her nose and led Rey on down a hallway where she paused at a door, twisted the knob and shoved it open. A long-haired man lounged on a bed flipping through his cd collection.

"Morri, get your clothes into the drier or you'll have to wash them again."

He ignored her.

She reached into her pocket and pulled something out. With a flick of her wrist her baton snapped to full extension. That got Morrison's attention. "Okay, okay, on it," he said, reflexively guarding her favorite target — his ear.

Finally, Lyla led Rey through a pair of finely carved double doors and into a spacious study. Lyla closed the doors behind them and the racket from the rest of the house died down. Chaska stood up from his place on the floor where he'd been sitting cross-legged in meditation.

"Thanks for inviting me over," Rey said. "As I said on the phone, it's important. I have a message for you from the Queen of Spring."

Chaska turned his head curiously while Lyla watched with interest.

"I tried to convince her to lift the banishment completely, but she won't. She is willing to make a specific exception. If she is notified as to where Lyla will be and what she will be doing, then she is permitted to be within the acknowledged bounds of the Duchy. If the Queen is deceived, then when she finds Lyla in places she is not to be," Rey recited, making it clear these were not her words but Ishtar's, "the Queen will punish her herself. If Lyla resists, the Queen will kill her. If Lyla enters the city, it means she accepts this agreement." And then Rey waited, watching Chaska and Lyla's reaction to the Queen's words. She had no idea if Lyla would be angry or not, or even if she'd be appreciative of Rey's efforts.

Chaska nodded. "I see. How do we get word to her?"

Lyla interrupted. "Hold on a sec. What sort of punishment are we talking here?"

"I don't know," Rey replied. "I did not ask because I did not want to negotiate on your behalf without your permission. As for contacting her, you can do that through me until other arrangements can be made for you to contact her directly, if she wishes it to be that way."

"Okay." Lyla looked thoughtful.

Chaska frowned at her, but he wasn't inclined to ask what she was thinking. "So," he said, turning his attention back toward Rey. "It's time to move forward with the plan regarding the Pure pack, then. Is your friend ready to lure them out of town?"

"Not tonight," Rey said with a shake of her head. "Mira's hurt pretty bad. We need to get her healed up a bit first. I have been thinking of ways we can do this. It'll be difficult to lure them out of Mythic. We've got the options of ambushing them in Mythic near Mira's pond, or driving them out of Mythic. I've learned of three Uratha packs that may have survived the Silver Crusade, but I haven't had any contact with them: the Heartrippers, Storm Chasers and Death Dancers. They might be persuaded to help."

Chaska asked, "Mira?" Rey clarified that was what Mizuko went by now. "The Storm Chasers were mostly killed in the war. The sole survivor joined up with another pack in a different territory. The Death Dancers pack is gone, too, divided between Stormfront and the Howlrunners. The Heartrippers still hold territory in the northern fringe of Mythic. Right now there is a huge expanse of city territory unclaimed by Uratha, but ringed by allied packs. Portions are claimed here and there by small groups of other shapechangers, but there aren't many conflicts between them and us."

"What about the new kids," Lyla asked.

Chaska nodded. "Stormfront gained four more members not long ago. One is just a kid still in high school who just went through her first change. The other three came down during the war. None of these four are Boneshadows and the female that hangs with them has been pushing the others to strike out on their own, or advance in the pack. In a pack this big, all the more important roles are filled and the only way to move up is through challenges and fights. But they aren't ready yet."

Lyla disagreed. "Three of them had managed to gain territory in Denver, Chaska. They can handle it. They came here to find a better life and better territory. This is an opportunity."

"And would get Shayd out of your hair, too." Chaska grinned. The young woman was devious and had two males wrapped around her little finger. Since Chaska had permitted mating between werewolves here, her influence over Blood Fang and Odin had only grown. He knew Lyla saw the young woman more as competition than an asset. Chaska smiled grimly but shook his head. "Those kids aren't ready. We put them in Mythic blind and they'll have to deal with problems like this; small, veteran packs of Pure would eat them alive. Or worse, convert them. No, we can deal with a little diversity in the pack until they are ready."

"What tribes do Shayd and the others belong to?"

Chaska filled her in. "Shayd's a Hunter in Darkness, Odin is a Stormlord, and Fang is a Blood Talon. The new kid hasn't chosen a tribe yet so she's still a ghost wolf."

Rey nodded. "Do you think the Heartrippers might be willing to help?" She was thinking that having contact with a potentially friendly pack in Mythic would be good, and certainly would further her role within the Sages.

"Maybe, but Stormfront is actually much closer to the Pond than they are."

"Where is their territory in Mythic?" Rey hoped to find out from Chaska and Lyla, and not resort to making a deal with Chase. She might need to talk to him anyway, to find out what packs are still in Mythic, but that was something she was hoping to avoid.

"They are located on the north edge of the city," Chaska said. "The pond is at the south, nearly at the border between Santa Fe and Mythic. But we were going to try to lure them out of town, yes?"

"Or drive them out, whichever it takes. The key is to make sure they have a powerful reason to leave the relative safety of Mythic." A wicked little smile danced on Rey's lips. With Less and Rover's help, she could do it. Maybe.

"Okay. Just let us know when and where," Chaska said. "If we remove them from the territory around the

pond, then we can set up a new pack of wolves in that area." Chaska looked to Lyla as well. Lyla nodded her approval of the plan.

A Forsaken pack in her backyard, now that interested Rey. She wondered what loci might be around there, but that wasn't something she could figure out for herself. Other shapeshifters might, and the thought made her murmur "Hamilton."

The meeting was over at that point and after some idle conversation, Rey went home.

The next day, Rey contacted Chase regarding the location and extent of the Pure pack. That, he reported, he wasn't sure. He guessed it ran from west Mythic City toward the center, but he wasn't sure because he wasn't seeing markings that positively identified them. That was because they were deliberately trying to keep from being spotted by Uratha in the area.

After speaking with Chase, Rey sought out Mira. They needed to discuss the Pure pack, and come up with a plan to deal with them. The flowering woodblood found her nymph mate secure in the motley hollow. She was lying on the shore, one had trailing in the frigid, wintry water of the spring, while she was curled up in a nightgown on the shore.

"Good afternoon," Rey said softly, not wanting to startle her friend.

Mira's eyes fluttered open and then she blinked at the afternoon sky. She focused on Rey, smiled, and then sat up. The large bandage at the base of her neck was gone now, but there was still an ugly mark that looked only partially healed.

Rey frowned. "Why haven't you healed yourself up yet?"

"Some injuries cannot be healed even with supernaturally powered metabolisms," Mira stated. "Amaranthine, the only fruit with powerful enough healing powers, is out of season. Nor is the healing to be found in the hands of Spring strong enough to heal the worst wounds, except maybe by the hand of the most powerful Spring courtiers. And frankly, I can't afford the Spring Queen's prices."

"I don't blame you." Rey tried not to shiver looking at the scantily clad nymph. "We need to talk about dealing with those werewolves who are after you. I have a couple of ideas, including a backup plan. I think you'll like my Plan A. It'll likely scare the werewolves, and create a lasting fear amongst the werewolf population in general in Mythic." Her smile held more than a bit of wicked anticipation.

Intrigued, Mira mirrored Rey's smile. *"Scare them? I would really like to see them running scared for a change. What do you have in mind?"*

"My dream plan would be to find a way to drive them through a Gate into the Hedge and let the Thorns take them, but that's not something easily achieved. So, we go with Plan A, or as I like to call it, Drown the Dogs. My friends of the Storm Front Pack will be helping, but the bulk of the work will be done by our motley. Well, actually by you. I didn't think you'd mind." Rey's smile was both innocent and evil at the same time. "We draw them all to the pond. It doesn't matter how, but we need all members of the pack hunting you there or this won't work. Once we've got them all there, they get driven into the pond. There, you can drown them or whatever you want to do. Those who manage to get out of the pond, or can't get driven into it, will be driven out of town and taken care of by Storm Front.

"The vital thing is that they have to be taken down really quick, either killing them outright or putting them

straight to unconsciousness. Werewolves who get hurt really bad, they could go into what's called a Death Rage, where they indiscriminately kill anyone around them, regardless of them being friend, foe or innocent bystander.

"Any questions so far?"

"As long as they don't bring guns to my water fight, I think we're good. I can't guarantee how many of the pack will show, but maybe that doesn't matter if we scare them enough, right?"

"The only person with a gun will be me," Rey said with a chuckle. "My specialty is hunting rifles. But I'm pretty sure that if you let the wolf that's watching the pond know you want to speak with all of the pack, you'll get most if not all of them. If you don't, well, as long as we get most of them, the pack will be broken and that's the important part. Storm Front will be putting another pack of werewolves in the area around the pond, and you won't be in any danger from them. We'll just make sure they know to stay out of the pond."

"Regardless of how things end up, the important thing is that we send a message to all the other wolves out there about what will happen if they mess with us. Drowning the Pure like newborn pups will send a rather clear message." Rey shifted how she was standing. "And getting this done quickly will send a message to the Duchy that we shouldn't be messed with either. Our Queen is paying the Wardens to find the werewolves and to collect information about them. That will take too long, so I've decided to deal with it now before it's too late."

"How soon do we need to move on this?"

"The sooner the better," Rey admitted. "If I were them and couldn't find you, I'd start tracking down the people you care about and grabbing them in order to force you out into the open. Storm Front is more or less ready to go when I give the word. We just need to find a way to keep the park clear of innocents so there won't be any limitations on what we can do to get the job done."

"It's generally empty after midnight. But then it will be hard to see me in the middle of the lake at that time," Mira mused. She'd hoped for more time to heal the wounds the werewolves had already treated her to, but she didn't want to risk the wolves going after her friends.

"They've got pretty good night vision," Rey said, "so it won't be as hard as you might think. I'm sure, though, that Less might be able to come up with a way to keep people away from the area where we'll be doing our thing."

"Okay. Just give me a few more days," she asked. That wouldn't be enough time to heal completely, but she'd be better off than she was now. *"I'll be ready."*

"Okay. We'll need to get Amber stashed somewhere safe. Somewhere she can't get out of and not go wandering off because she's bored or thinks she can help with this. I can probably stay at the casino if I need to. There's always rooms closed to the public for one reason or another that I could use. And I'm sure Less has something set up he can use. But what time of day are we going to do this? After midnight. If so, we need to find a way to make sure we Changelings can see."

"Lighting up the area will cause problems and attract attention by passing police cruisers. We may have to wait for the right weather conditions and moonlight."

Rey shook her head. "No, I mean hedgespinning something. Rover and I could work on it so it'd be done faster."

"Can I help?"

"Sure, though I don't know if it can be done in time," Rey admitted.

"We'll do the best we can," Mira said. "Would you mind making a call for me when you get home?"

"Depends on who you want me to call," Rey replied with a smile.

"I stopped by Corazon and let my boss know I wasn't feeling well and would be out a few days. He saw my injury and knows better, but he's discrete enough to not ask too many questions. I figured it was safe to contact him because Santa Fe was your friends' territory. That hasn't stopped these Pure wolves when they really want to go there, but I figured it was as safe as it could be. Contacting Drake to give him a message wasn't possible without exposing him to a much greater risk, since he lives in Mythic. And if I used my phone, then the vamps might pick up who I have been contacting, since I just have what Leo gave me. I've stopped using it. I couldn't travel to Drake's place, for fear of leading the wolves to him. So, if you don't mind, could you give him a message for me? Just tell him I'm not feeling well and have come home to the Hollow until I get better. I don't want him to worry or expose him to any more of this mess."

"I can do that for you," Rey said with a nod.

"I appreciate it."

Rey watched Mira for a few moments. "It's going to take some getting used to, you talking aloud rather than using sign language."

Mira shrugged, though she understood what Rey meant. She used to use sign regardless of the situation. *"I still use it, except in cases in the mortal realm where I need to be understood by those who don't know ASL, or here in the Hedge where even a siren's voice isn't out of place."* She smiled ruefully. *"Besides, opening my mouth instead of using sign is what got the attention of those damn wolves in the first place. I don't plan on overdoing it where it might make a difference."*

Rey left Mira there safely within the hollow and returned to the mortal realm where she left a message on Mira's behalf for Drake.

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Over the next several days, Less made sure his network kept up with working to track down the vampires. There was progress made in that a builder was found that offered custom construction such as that used in private clubs, sets for pornography, and for private homeowners. Homeowners liked to remain private, of course, and the builder wasn't interested releasing a client list. Some ideas were passed on to Less as to how to proceed, but they were mostly illegal and so it was up to Less whether it should be pursued or not. The ideas mainly consisted of posing as an authority figure, perhaps a police detective or something like that, and possibly forge a warrant in order to get access to that customer list. And of course, of all his people, Less had the greatest chance of success if he pulled that one off personally.

While that information was being collected, he had time to turn some attention to the upcoming ball he wished to throw, called the Spring Welcome. Squire Lyre was made director of this project and he was pleased to run with it. He even took the initiative to involve some of the highly social members of Spring in planning so that he might be sure the neighboring seasonal Courts would both enjoy the event.

Less also learned some details of Drake's romantic past. It seemed he had dated casually, a few changelings. The list was short and of course if he dated mortals, there was no way to really know unless one could figure out Drake's friends and managed to quiz them without arousing suspicion. The known casual, short-term relationships with members of both Spring and Summer have all ended relatively amicably. One was the tree/wood elemental, Nym, of the Spring Court. Then there was Rena, a beast wind-wing also of the Spring Court. Finally, he briefly dated Teara, fire-maiden of Summer.

Just before the final information regarding the custom builder was relayed to Less, contact was made with the Baron of Shadows' acting emissary. She reported that the Baron's Court had chosen to open communications with Less. And in fact, they were wondering if he might be able to supply a variety of blood vintages. While drinking 'dead' blood was not actually very nutritious so to speak, it was something they could enjoy and appreciate. Having a bottled supply would be nice — like being able to share fine wines at parties, only for the undead. The emissary suggested the Baron would pay well for such a supply, especially if it might be both exclusive and discrete.

Of course what Less was particularly interested in was the exchange of information. The emissary told him that the Baron had appointed her as a go-between. She was not permitted to discuss any matter that might relate to Kindred (her term for her fellow vampires) business. But if there were matters of cross-interest, such as a supernatural predator that threatened Kindred but was not itself Kindred, then the Baron would allow a certain amount of discourse.

When Less asked as to whether Xavier Klein was a member of the Barony, he was stonewalled at first.

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Crystal, perched upon the small water heater to warm up swung her legs and softly thumped the heels of her worn sneakers against the old steel of radiator. "Well," she said, "if I say I can't talk about Mr. Klein, then it implies that he's Kindred. If I do talk about him, then I run risk of disobeying the Baron's order. If I say the wrong thing."

Less nodded. "We wouldn't want that." This was a common game amongst changelings. He pondered his next question while he idly flipped through photographs on a smartphone that had been found on one of the trains. "I do not wish to interfere with the Baron's territory. If something were to happen to a human named Ellie, who may or may not be associated with Mr. Klein, would this be considered trespassing?"

Crystal smiled. "Nope. Not by anyone I know."

Less was relieved that his wasn't going to compromise his new source of information. It did seem like there was some further information to be gained on the subject but since secrecy was paramount to not tipping off the vampires he didn't want to press. "You mentioned that the Baron would like specialty blood in exchange for information. Do you have a list of types that I could look at?"

Crystal didn't have a list but she had memorized what Baron Shadow showed interest in "stocking". She recited while Less noted it. The list was extensive and included blood from all kinds: the young and the old, both genders, a variety of racial types and even blood from unhealthy people. It seemed variety was more important than quantity, nor was it important if everything was found and supplied. The list was meant more as a guide for what the Baron was interested in supplying his guests rather than a shopping list.

It struck Less that as he sat there discussing the list as if it were fine wines with Crystal, the truth was grisly, even horrific when one considered that these monsters would hardly think twice about passing mortals around at their functions like an appetizer.

Less nodded and tried not to curl his lip too much. His detached elemental side figured that the list would be easier to provide than he had initially thought. He began to think long-term and wondered how he could turn this to his advantage. There were things in the Hedge that the vampires would not be expecting. Perhaps, eventually, they might become dependent on him and his supply.

"I'll see what I can do," he said as he ran over his coded notes. "Things are relatively quiet in our Duchy. There is a small pack of werewolves giving us some trouble but I don't expect that to affect you. I trust your turf war is more or less under control?"

"Well, we haven't had problems from outside sources for a while. Within Kindred society, well I can't talk about that, but I think you know how it goes any time there is a room full of dangerous, cunning, and powerful people stuck in one place too long. You have to plan three levels deep just to survive, or doom yourself to being someone else's pawn. Or worse. Just like politics anywhere, I would guess, except these politicians have fangs, powers, and bench press cars for fun." She made a face to indicate her distaste for politics in general.

"I'll take that to mean your politics will not have a direct affect on my people in the near future. As to the future, I don't expect we'll need regular meetings. You know how to contact me. If I need to contact you I will paint a heart with a keyhole on the switchgear transformer box near the tunnel entrance. If there isn't anything else?" He pushed away from the shelves he was leaning against and pocketed the phone.

"Well." She shoved away from the hot heater and closed the distance between them. Her hands touched either side of his throat and he could feel the intense, borrowed heat radiating from them. "I wouldn't mind seeing what you taste like," she said with a wicked little smile. She searched his eyes for a moment while he struggled not to give offense by jerking away from her. "Some other time, maybe."

She let her hands fall away and then zipped out the door in a blur that was easy to miss but for the wind she generated in passing.

Less shook out the revulsion he felt from her touch. It was a dangerous game to invite the vampire so close but there had to be dialog and diplomacy to provide security. Though, he couldn't help wishing he had Hedge thorns growing out of his skin.

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The next day, Less made contact with Roger Buckman, the man his sources indicated he was the best respected resource for construction of specialty bondage equipment in the city. He wore the face and assumed the identity of the man who had lost his cell phone on the train. Posing as a buyer, he made arrangements to visit Buckman's warehouse where he had some examples of his work available for show. Less took the opportunity to view the place and scope out security. For what it was worth, Buckman appeared to be a quite capable welder and rather inventive. Buckman kept his client files on a computer in his office. Security was present, but at a medium level — there were locks on doors and windows, but no fancy electronics or cameras were evident.

He came back early Friday morning. Contracts allowing him to manipulate light kept his actions out of sight of any passerby, while Worm picked locks for him. After getting into the office, the Winter King patiently waited for Buckman to arrive and log into his computer, noting the password the unsuspecting welder entered.

Buckman went through his various work orders for the day, then signed out and went to the warehouse to begin work. Less meanwhile logged in and quickly exported all the files he could find that seemed relevant.

After that Less easily slipped out, rejoined Worm and went to Worm's place where they could go to work on the data. By early evening, they'd managed to sift through names, dates and times and managed to come up with a Mr. Ray Smith. Ray had paid in cash and one delivery and installation order was made to a ranch house in Brenan, in the northern Mythic region. If this Ray was the same Ray Mira spoke of, then that might be Xavier Klein's own address. Or one of them.

Less discussed the prospects of getting surveillance on the ranch house. At the very least they could abscond with the letter-carrier to the Hedge and put in one of their agents for a few days.

Worm was a little taken aback at mention of kidnapping someone and bringing them into the Hedge — that one hit rather close to home and made her rather uncomfortable. However, she didn't mind hunkering down with a camera and telephoto lens, and she told him so. Mortal-world intelligence services were her bread and butter. She could even rent some used car that might match the neighborhood and give her some cover.

What they knew of vampires told them that capturing them on camera might be futile, but this vampire had four ghouls that Mira knew of. Perhaps tracking them and activity they generate to and from the house might tell them who all might be in residence. Less gave her the go-ahead, but warned her to be careful and allow no contact with the vampire Xavier. His powers of mind-control were far too dangerous. She agreed.

Less sent word, privately and securely of course, to Claire to watch out for the known vampire servants named Ellie and Ray. The Blood Tears club was the hub of the witch's inner circle and that seemed the kind of place they might appear.

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Friday

When Rey and Less arrived, they found Mira lounging at the edge of the cold little spring that featured at center of the motley hollow, idly watching as Ollie played at catching treats of dried fish that the nymph tossed out into the water. As they approached, Mira was heard to say, "No I hadn't thought of that. Thanks so much for bringing that up, as if I didn't have enough to worry about." She sighed.

Mira must have heard her friends approach, though, because she stood up and turned to face them. She put a little smile on and greeted them. "Hello Rey, Less," she signed.

"Hello, Mira," Rey said. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing, really," Mira signed. "Just... I've never contemplated something like this before. I mean, pre-meditated and all. When it happened in the past it was heat of the moment, and half of those times it seems like I never remember what happened anyway. This time it's different. We're planning to really kill those werewolves, aren't we?"

"If we have to," Rey replied, taking note of Mira's comment about not remembering things. "Terrifying them and getting them to run, abandoning their territory, would be the best bet. They're not going to give it up easily, not with the effort they'll have put into it. We need to have back-up plans.

"The primary goal is to get rid of them so they stop hunting you, and won't expand their hunt to the rest of us. Get them out of Mythic and as far away from us as possible." Rey looks from Mira to Less and then back again. "We can't do a straight up fight against them. We'd never survive it. For non-werewolves to win, we'd have to take them down hard and fast, getting them to unconsciousness in a single attack. If we fail, it'll send the werewolves into a ultra-powerful murderous rage where they'll attack and kill anyone or anything around them, including their own friends and loved ones.

"So I was thinking about ways to deal with them. The top of my list was get them into the Hedge and let the Thorns have them. But while that might be satisfying, it would necessarily send a good enough message to everyone else out there about what happens when they mess with us.

"The second option was to find a way to lure them out of Mythic and into Santa Fe, but that'll be next to impossible. So that leaves an ambush at Ottowi Pond, with my werewolf friends to help provide muscle."

Mira nodded. "I want to fight smarter this time, too. So, I've already summoned and have in place elementals in Ottowi." She had done a bit more than lounge about and heal over the past few days. "They are set to monitor but wait to act upon my command. And I could bring another with me when I go to the other side tonight."

If that meant she'd awakened at least two elementals there, then bringing a third along would bring the number to three water elementals, all formed at Mira's own power level. None of them might be equal to a werewolf in war form, but if allowed to act within their own element, within the pond, they could prove deadly effective.

"I'll sing for them," Mira said. Singing was a rarity for the nymph, but Less remembered well the deadly, wordless tune she'd hummed when she went to battle. "That should get their attention." She turned and looked somberly into the spring. "It's... this is what I was made for, wasn't it. Luring people to me and then ending their lives."

"We don't necessarily have to kill them," Rey added quickly. "Werewolves can regenerate just about any kind of damage or injury. Get them out of the water fast enough, once they go unconscious and they won't die. That would scare the heck out of them. And that, combined with my picking up the Tale of Baba Yaga, we could send them running with the Stormfront pack on their heels."

A smile spread across Mira's lips. "That could work! I know that spell, too. I could assist you with it."

"I'll need all the help I can get," Rey replied gratefully since using the Tale takes time, and I don't know how much time we'll have."

"So, the goal is to drown them. How about getting them to that point? I'll have all the elemental help I can summon, but if everything works perfectly I'll have four werewolves in the water, at which point my Voice no longer works," Mira signed. "I can't hamstring them that if they can't hear me. My elementals are strong, almost as strong as I will be at the time — assuming everything goes right — but I don't have any idea how strong werewolves are. Rey?"

"Depends on what form they are in," Rey explained. "They could be anywhere from normal human strength to that of the Paladin of Shadows, though the latter is unlikely." She paused for a moment, and then a wicked smile curved her lips. "But if you had help keeping them down there or otherwise distracting them, then it wouldn't be quite so difficult for you. Vampires don't have to breathe so they can't drown. Do you think Remy and his coterie might be willing to help?"

Mira's eyes lit up. "I don't know, but I sure would like to try to sweet talk them into it. I'll be honest with you. If they have more than human strength, I think that despite our good plan so far, and the fact that I'll have elementals in the water with me, my chances of drowning them are actually pretty slim. Possible, and worth the risk since the alternative is slavery or death, but slim. I'll end up a werewolf chew toy without more help. So, I'll ask them. I have to ask."

"Even if you can't drown them completely, it's better than nothing," Rey said "If the fear of drowning can be instilled in them, it'll support the story I plan on telling them."

"Yes, but I'm very interested in surviving to that point," Mira signed. "Less, can you help me in the water, too? It's very cold, but I wouldn't think hypothermia is a problem for Winter. And maybe you can make a bubble of air around your head or something to avoid the whole drowning thing?"

"I can probably avoid drowning though I'd catch my death without a sweater," said Less. "I'm not sure what I could do down there to help. Filling the water with bubbles might make it hard for them to see, and maybe reduce their buoyancy. It might prevent them from swimming to the surface. Rey, will you tell them your

story while they're in the water or after they are pulled out?"

"They're not going to get pulled out," Rey said with a shake of her head. "Mira's elementals is going to toss them back on shore like so much garbage, and that's when they'll be treated to one of Auntie Rey's bedtime stories." She looked at Less. "All of this needs to go down without any mundanes around. Can you find a way to keep people away from the pond tonight? We can't afford to wait any longer. They've had several days to regroup and plan and do who knows what."

"No problem," responded Less. "I'll forge some municipal signs to keep people away. Something about spraying poisonous chemicals to control pests should do it."

"So," Mira signed again, "I just need to contact Remy... then we can meet at the park after dusk."

Assuming all are finished?
Done here

Mira led the way up the path to the Door which led to Rey's place. From there she could call Remy and they could all get ready for whatever encounter lay in store for them tonight.

The nymph smiled to her friend, called up a tiny bit of magic and opened the Door. Rey stepped through and found herself back in her guest room. Next, Mira appeared.

Less never did.

Rey frowned, then walked back through the Door to see what was keeping him. The Door opened again, as it detected the presence of a member of the motley and Rey found herself back in the hollow.

Behind her, Mira said, "Is it okay to use the phone in the kitchen, Rey?" Mira turned and looked through the Door at her friend. "Rey?"

"Where's Less," Rey asked. "He was right behind us. And why did you use Glamour to open the Door?"

Mira considered. "Well, Less must have decided to take one of his tunnels," she theorized.

"Maybe," Rey said. "And what about Glamour and the Door?"

Mira thought for a moment, remembering that being a member of the motley was the Key for this Door. She shrugged. "I didn't even realize I did that."

"That's not good, Mira." Rey's frown showed the depth of her concern.

The nymph blinked; she didn't understand why Rey was concerned.

"After what happened with Xavier, you're not the slightest bit concerned you're doing things you don't realize you're doing?"

"But, I only opened the door," she signed. Frowning, she looked back at the door, wondering if something really had happened. "We went through just fine. Less must have taken another way, don't you think?"

"Perhaps," Rey said, "but that still doesn't explain why you opened the door the way you did. I was worried when you said there were things you did, things you didn't remember doing, but seeing it happen in front of me." She shook her head.

Mira started to get very worried and it showed on her face. "You think something happened just now? Like

when we were fighting that killer last year and I blacked out but you saw me do things? You think I did something to Less?" She stared back at the Door, scared she might really have sent their friend somewhere and thinking all the worst things.

"I don't know." Rey walked over to Mira and put a hand on her shoulder. "I know you'd never intentionally do anything to harm either Less or myself. I just wish I knew if there was a way to discover if there are any orders hidden away in your subconscious."

"Me too." Mira wore a worried look on her face. It was not the first time she'd had to face the fact that she wasn't in control of her own destiny. She looked pale enough to lose her balance, but she set her face with determination to try to do something about it.

"Maybe if I open the door again," she signed, "we'll see where Less went."

"It wouldn't hurt to try," Rey agreed, and she hoped it wasn't anywhere bad.

Mira swallowed and touched the Door. Again she used magic to open it instead of relying on the Key, but the space beyond the door was occupied only by the familiar motley hollow.

Since it would be open for ten seconds or so, Mira walked through it, turned, and walked back, looking warily all around the edges of the Door. Nothing unusual happened.

"I guess we're going to have to wait and hope," Rey said finally, "that he did decide at the last minute to go home a different way."

—

When Less stepped through the door fully expecting to end up in his friend's home, he was shocked to feel the crunch of snow beneath his feet and the white, snowy realm that surrounded him and quickly set about chilling him to the bone.

Squinting through the white glare, he looked about for the Door, but it was gone, as if it had never existed. Instead, he found himself in a wide clearing. All around him gentle hills led to dark lines of a distant pine forest. Something felt familiar here. He slowly turned in place to try get his bearings. Every direction looked the same. The bright, grey skies revealed no sun but only cast down blinding glare that the snow seemed to magnify, and let fall stray snowflakes that seemed always to find their way into an eye, making him blink.

Then he saw Her.

The tall, regal figure stood motionless atop a low hill dressed in her blue-green gown covered in a pattern that matched the cracking ice that heralded the end of winter. She wore a silver snowflake belt clinging to her hips and dangling extra length down one thigh. Her crown of ice grew from the top of her head, reaching for the sky.

The Other to whom he'd given his heart looked coldly back at him and waited.

The cold was forgotten. He gazed up at the features he had been trying to remember for years stacked upon years and traced every curve, noted every colour. He knees felt weak and he stumbled in the snow. All the questions, all the prepared responses, angry rants, mournful pleadings, all fled his mind.

"I searched for you," was all he could say.

It seemed there was some movement, but Less was unsure if he had crawled to her or she had walked to him. All he knew was that she was there now, not six feet from him. Her blue-tinged lips formed a smile.

"Yet your love for me allowed you to carry on," she said. "You are strong, my boy. Let us speak of the future."

His Queen paused to allow him time to mentally catch up. "You risk yourself much these days. Far more than ever you did before. No, don't explain," she added before he could waste thought upon it. "I see into your heart; I still have it. You will do what you feel you need to do. But now your time grows very short. The future may be fluid, but the Fates appear to be ready to pluck your thread from the weave. And so, I choose to grant you a gift of knowledge and a gift of life. Together, your life may be spared. Will you accept my gifts?"

"I am no longer a boy," he said petulantly. "Winter has made me King!" He wanted the Queen to know that. He paused to think about The Other's offer. His mind was spinning. Memories of his time with His Queen, her abandonment of him, his search tumbled across his vision. The werewolves were only an annoying nag at the back of his brain. "Gifts? Gifts are freely given with nothing expected in return. Where do you fit into my future?"

"I didn't realize you didn't like gifts. Very well, then they will not be free. I will ask you for some small favor. Does that fit into your future?" She raised a darkly amused expression lit her eyes.

"You abandoned me." He said it calmly but he was beginning to seethe within. "You took everything! Even the memories. I was destroyed." The anger suddenly deflated into the hollow sadness that permeated his existence. "And now you are here trying to sell me your favour?" He shook his head and felt tears coming to his eyes. "My heart beats." He looked up and met those eyes that had for so long devoured him, until now so frustratingly exiled to snippets of vaguely remembered dreams. "It pounds! If you care at all about it continuing to do so then you will help me willingly without conditions. Show me that I do not quest in vain."

She looked at him sharply. "Your pain. Your memories. Your desires. Your loss. How very ... adorably selfish. You remind me of myself." She sighed as she saw the rising anger in Seleman's eyes. "Listen to me, young king of winter. Have you not heard my messages? Have you not seen the signs I have sent you? I have many times and in many ways tried to tell you I was here. But you would never speak to me. You force me to bring you here, and then you have the nerve to lash out at me with your words."

Her expression returned shifted to cold timelessness. "Yes, Seleman. I want something. But, so do you. And what you want is many times more valuable to you, than the small thing I would ask."

Having her use the name that he had to make for himself because she took his birth name cut him deeply. How he wanted to watch those lips form the syllables of his real name. "Messages!?" he cried. "Everything I do, everything I have done, is to somehow extract some tiny indication that you are out there!" He felt like he would split in two. "If it is nothing to you that my heart stops beating, then is there any reason for it to continue?" He slumped to his knees in the snow.

The Queen of Ice regarded him for a long moment. "I fear you have looked in the wrong places. I will offer you the first gift of knowledge. It is up to you to accept it as truth or refuse it as fiction."

"There once was a nymph who wandered lost in a cold forest. She wandered from tree to tree as if they were refuges from the cold, but they offered her little help or protection, for their branches hung low and the needles were sharp against her skin. She could not find her way because she had no home, no place to return to other than that from which she fled. You see, she was not a nymph of wood and earth that might find a place in this forest. She was instead a nymph of still waters and lost places. How can these poor creatures know which way is home if they have no stream or river to follow?"

"The Queen of Ice and Snow came upon this nymph lying at the very edge of my own forest. Instead of trying to flee the forest, she had become confused and thought her home might lie where there was more water, albeit in the frozen form of snow. When I saw her, she lay dying. She could not speak and her eyes were closed, but I could see into her heart. She did not want to die. Her slumbering, dying mind agreed to my promise of life and a way home, so I plucked a shard of ice from my own heart and thrust it deep inside hers.

"When she awoke and rose from the forest floor, she found she could protect herself from frost and ice. The frozen shard within her core led her unerringly through the forest, past the Tangle, toward the place she would call home. The shard was a piece of me, but it was also part of a scion of winter, who would one day be King.

"I believe you know this nymph well." She looked at him and smiled. Her eyes bored into him and it seemed as if a whole conversation took place in that one look.

How well do you know your nymph? the look asked.

He had no answer.

She was sent to you; she is not from your city. Do you know where she is really from?

Again, there was no answer.

You are so careful, so knowledgeable, so thorough in your investigations to all others, but have you looked so carefully at your friends?

The Queen's smile widened. Through this nymph, her eyes said, we are yet connected. It is through her that the second gift can be realized.

Less basked in her attention, giving up his body heat to her. "I *have* seen you in her!" he gasped. "I thought it was a trick of a wishful mind. She- She is our daughter?" Perhaps he presumed too much. At the very least they could be considered brother and sister of the Hedge, but he sought desperately to link himself with his lost Queen.

For a moment, the Queen appeared startled, but then her cool mask returned. "No, of course not. She was once human that took in the power of Arcadia while she was shaped by her Lord Master into a nymph. She was born of human parents, just as you were. She is a changeling."

Less deflated a little but carried on. "And she can give me the gift of life?" he asked.

"No, but the unwitting nymph can be useful later, if you accept what I offer you." Her hand went to her belt and plucked a single, large snowflake from it. "When you are in most need, crush this small token and you will be spared from certain death."

Less reached for it but pulled back. Despite how badly he wanted his Queen's token, he knew how the True Fae operated. "At what cost?"

"I would like you to find something. It is called — " She said something that sounded like *uh-face do*. "It is hidden, difficult to detect and requires magic senses you don't have, but I suspect you know a sorceress or two that might be able to sense its presence. When you find it, I want you to keep it until I pay you a visit."

Less was relieved. He had expected the price of saving his own life would be at the cost of another's life, or being bound into slavery. "I will look for this thing," he said as he nodded and held out his hand to receive his gift.

The queen bathed him in a wintry smile and placed her gift into his outstretched hand. "I will see you soon."

The world seemed to warp around him, shifting and flowing, and then with a gusty exhale of frigid air, he was in the motley Hollow looking right into Mira's astonished face. Although Mira's body partially blocked her view, Rey could see the familiar outline beyond the nymph, as if the King of Winter had just down come into view from just a few steps further down the winding path that led down to the spring. He had just enough time to push his one-use, life-saving token into a pocket without it being seen by his startled motley mates.

Several of Less' mouths made awkward smiles as he stepped back out of Mira's intimate range. She looked different to him now, even more like family than before. His brain tumbled about trying to come up with a cover story but knew nothing would right true. "How long was I gone?"

It took a moment for Mira's mind to catch up with her eyes. When she did, she closed her sagging jaw. "Um. A few minutes or less." She managed to remember to use Glymjack Sign.

Rey followed Mira, but said nothing. She watched Less, her expression a strange combination of warm concern and cold predator.

The door closed behind them, shutting them off from the view of Rey's guest room again, save for the dim outline visible through the Hedge.

Mira studied Less carefully, analyzing his appearance to make sure he was okay. Unconvinced, she asked, "Were you hurt? Rey says I may have sent you somewhere, that I used magic to open the Door when I didn't have to. I'm sorry if I did. I had forgotten about the Key. My brain still feels like it's too full and my memories are kind of a mess. I'm truly sorry if I did something to you."

And there was his cover story. "No, I'm not hurt. I just seemed to pass through a succession of Doors before I ended up back here. I'm sure it wasn't your fault. The Hedge is a mysterious place." He looked at her with warm affection, overlaying a memory of her icy form, and reached out to gently touch her shoulders. "Are *you* ok?"

Mira didn't startle or shrink from his unexpected touch, though it did surprise her. She took it as a sign he was trying to reassure her all was well. "Okay," she signed, "but after tonight I'm going to need to figure out what's going on with me. I've had too many fingers messing with my mind. Vampires twice and now werewolf attempts make Veridia's manipulations seem actually reassuring and that just isn't right."

"I would be very pleased to help with that," said Less. "But we'd best hurry on. I have a lot of work to do on those fake signs before the ambush tonight."

Mira nodded, smiled, but this time let *him* open the Door and followed him through to Rey's house.

—

Less got to work on the forged signs. His home was closest to the park, really just a hop across the railroad tracks and a short walk. He didn't anticipate any trouble completing his task.

Rey had some things to work out. She needed to identify the gallery that the lead werewolf had art and work through it to send word on Mira's behalf indicating the desire to talk.

Mira called Remy to ask for help. The phone rang a few times and a woman's voice she didn't recognize answered, saying "Good evening, Mira. Remy will be with you in just one moment." She heard a faint click and classical music played over the phone. After a minute or so, the music stopped.

"Good evening, Mira," Remy said, his voice warm and smooth.

"You know, I've always wondered about greetings. Is that a person wishes you would have a good evening, or is it comment on the state of the evening in general? I guess it doesn't matter." Mira knew she was rambling because she was a little afraid she'd ask her question, he'd say no, and then she wasn't sure what she'd do. "Anyway, hello. I hope everyone is doing okay."

"I believe we are, thank you. I trust you and your motley are doing well."

"The thing is my friends and I have figured out a solution to this werewolf issue. Apparently, they consider me an oracle and they want to use my ability to help them rekindle a war. The trouble is they won't take no for an answer. I can maybe negotiate a little for breathing room, but I get the distinct impression that if they can't use me, then they'll make sure no one else can either."

Mira sighed into the empty space. She knew what he was thinking. "I know. I have a lot of issues. Anyway, we have a plan to eliminate about half of these problems tonight. The trouble is I think we're a little... outgunned here. I could really use your help. And... pretty much everyone."

"I'm not sure how much help we could provide against werewolves," Remy says. "What kind of help do you need?"

Mira hemmed, uncomfortable with the slaughter they'd planned, yet knowing it was the only certain way to get out of the situation. "I need people who can stay under water. The plan is to ambush them at my pond. I've... raised some elementals that will assist me, beings of living water. Less will be there and Rey will be there ready to snipe them from a distance as well. Those who run will be heading straight into Rey's werewolf allies and destroyed. Not that I expect them to run. Which leads me to the major problem with the plan; I'll be trying to drown an entire pack of werewolves at once. Even with my elementals I have no illusions as to my chances. These wolves are battle hardened and experienced. I've already confronted them once personally and came away worse for it.

"Basically, I need more hands, Remy. Strong hands that will hold them down until the water takes them."

"I see. Who suggested this plan?"

"Rey did," Mira responded. "Why do you ask?"

"I didn't think you would come up with something quite so ambitiously outside your capabilities," Remy replied, and Mira could hear touches of both amusement and speculation in his voice. "Would you mind if I called Rey and got more details of the plan from her?"

Actually, she was a little surprised he asked. She figured he would anyway. "You could. Anyway, the point is to scare them so they spread it around not to mess with me anymore. So, I have to keep them down long enough that the water takes them and they pass out, then toss them onto the shore for Rey and I to put the absolute fear of god into 'em. It was Rey's idea to scare them like that."

"I must say I am glad I'm on her good side."

"Remy," Mira stated, her voice dropped from her the light tone she'd used so far to a flat, very serious one. "They cut my neck and threw a friend and his motorcycle into a tree. I have a scar. They are threatening my life and if I don't return from faerie to deal with them now, they'll be hunting anything that had contact with me to try to get to me. I want to protect my friends. And I want my revenge. If you can't help me, tell me now so I have time to find someone else."

"Of course I will help," Remy replied immediately. "I will talk to Carson. Wilson, Annabeth and Minerva are not fighters, so they won't be of much help in the water, but they may be able to help in other ways. How soon will we need to be at the pond?"

"I expect this will all go down around midnight, but I'm heading there now. They have some of their own watching for me, so I'll appear in the middle of the pond, tell them I'm ready to speak to their pack and set a time for midnight. Crap," she added. "Getting in there without being detected by werewolf senses could be a serious problem for you guys. I think I might have a solution for that. One moment, please."

Mira held a quick, muted conversation with someone off the phone. There was a long pause, and then a barely heard answer. "Okay. I can bring you through the back door to the Pond. You could go with me, the way no one but a handful of people in the this world know."

"Alright," Remy says. "When and where shall I met you?"

"Rey's place as soon as you are able." Mira gave him the address.

"We'll be there."

—

Shortly thereafter, Remy, Carson, and the others arrived. Rey and Mira wasted no time in greeting them, then Mira brought them through the Door in the guest room right off the front entrance to the house. She checked to be sure it was clear (as in, the sun was not shining in the Hedge) and then funneled her undead friends into the Hollow.

It was a bizarre experience, yet also enlightening. Auriel was there, curious about the visitors but unafraid. She was fascinating to some of the vampires; living evidence of a real faerie creature that was in no way human or ever was. Oliver the otter had disappeared, hiding in a little den he'd dug for himself along the bank of the spring. Mira led them all down the winding path down the steep slope to the spring, where they were able to see even more of the hollow.

To the far left was a grand house born of hedge wood and sweat the motley had constructed. Mira admitted that she never went inside but that it had been constructed by and for her friends. They passed a cave on the right of the path, one Mira told them was her refuge some times, and had been for the past week while she tried to heal and recover from the injury she received in her last meeting with the werewolves. She then warned them that the claws of these creatures were deadly beyond anything she'd encountered before and cautioned them not to engage them in melee but simply aid her elementals in holding them under water. Elementals could disincorporate under their claws and dissipate, but that was a small thing compared to the damage that could be done to her friends.

She also cautioned them not to pursue any werewolves that might escape the watery trap. Those that did became Rey's problem and she'd gun them down from a distance. There was no reason for the vampires to reveal or expose themselves.

Finally, she told them all that if things went badly they would have a route of certain escape. She would show them the Key to opening the Door from the Ottowi Pond side, but she cautioned them not to use it without her unless they had no alternative, for they would not be able to open any of the Doors in the Hollow again. They would have to wait for her or one of her friends to arrive and she was unsure what prolonged exposure to the fairy magics of the Hollow might do to them. She didn't tell them her larger concern was the effect of the undead's presence might have on the Hollow.

Once she'd finished the instructions and answering any questions they had, she led them all under the waters of the spring and to the bottom of the pond where she opened the Door there and let them through

into the dark waters of Ottowi Pond. The nymph touched each of them to let them know she appreciated their efforts on her behalf, then surfaced and waded into the shallows.

Wearing nothing that could weigh her down in the nearly-frozen water, she waited for the werewolves there in the dark, wintry pond.

—

Less carefully laid down a sheet of adhesive plastic over a counterfeit Mythic City Parks Board sign he had put together. His methods were archaic in an age of digital production but they were tried and true. He quickly trimmed the edges with sharp razor and admired his handiwork before stacking it with the rest. The message warned of the use of pesticides so horrible that it could cause the death of pets or children. He smirked as he imagined the hubub due at city hall in response. He would be sure to be there to feed on the displeasure - he would probably need it after tonight.

He dressed warmly under some municipal works coveralls for the anticipated cold night at the bottom of Ottowi Pond and put the signs under his arm for distribution. His sword was honed and ready, and he had prepared ahead of time many of the catches to the Fae Contracts he could invoke. He had shed a drop of blood from a plucked Hedge thorn to ensure he could open a gate, he had smudged a mirror, he had worked in his shop shoeless and away from natural light, and he had pinned on a small emblem of a windmill onto his lapel. Most importantly, he had the brittle snowflake the Snow Queen had given him tucked into a hinged snuff box.

Rey called Chaska and told him the part of the plan he and his pack would play - they were to come to the Ottowi Pond park but to stay back and stay out of sight. If they could get close without being sensed by the Pure pack, so much the better. They were to hang back until the Pure start to run, or a fight started, whichever came first. After that, they could do whatever they wanted to the Pure, so long as it got them out of Mythic.

Rey then called Ishtar and told her Lyla was going to be in Mythic, in and around the Ottowi Pond area. With that requirement done, she gathered up the things she was going to need for the evening. The hunting rifle and a handful of deer hunting cartridges were added to the pile. She originally thought about shooting at the Pure, but realized not only was she likely to get just one shot off, but a gunshot could draw the police. Not what she wanted. She wasn't going to leave it at home, though, as she might end up needing it.

She also got a couple cans of pepper spray, knowing that while it might not cause too much pain to a werewolf, a shot in the face would almost certainly mess up their sense of smell. The one thing Rey truly wished she had was a few talens of powdered wolfsbane. While not useful on a werewolf is in the throes of a Death Rage, blowing it into their face immediately transforms them back into their human - and thus more vulnerable - form.

Rey did wish she had some more time to prepare, to find or create scents that would support the story she intended to tell, but she had to work with what she had. She dressed in simple loose fitting clothes in shades of grey and black. Hopefully the clothes would make her outline a bit fuzzier, and the hoodie cover her face enough that it would make it difficult to see her features.

Last of all, she made sure she wore the fetish ring Lyla had given her. Rey had no idea what kind of tricks the Pure might get up to, but she wanted to be as prepared as she could.

With the stage set, the motley and their allies began to assemble.

Mira had brought her vampire allies and left them crouching at the bottom of the pond. She needed to be visible, however, so Mira swam near shore, then broke through the thin ice that had formed in the late afternoon. She stood hip deep in the water, broke shards of ice lining a ragged circle around her. The pond glowed an eerie blue beneath the cold, starlit sky. The nymph intended to be noticed, and wore her drenched, and now somewhat transparent white long shirt. It reflected what little light there was, something that would stand out to eyes adept at seeing in the dark.

Less had only just finished putting up the last of his signs and cloaked himself with an invisibility spell when he detected soft rustling of pine needles. He glanced up to see a long shape dropping from limb to limb out of a stubby, but thick old fir tree. It dropped dexterously from limb to limb effortlessly and landed in a crouch on the ground. When he stood up, Less made out of the form of a giant of a man. Easily nine feet tall if not more, and as thick as a tree trunk, Less had to take a moment to wrap his mind around what he'd seen. The nimble shape in the tree had grown into this huge man! But there was little time to wonder at it; the man slunk down toward the pond and Less had to move closer, cautiously, if he meant to be close enough to help should things go poorly for Mira.

Rey was picking her way over rocky terrain and around old trees when she finally came into sight of the pond to spy Mira standing in a break in the ice. A man so big it made Mira look no bigger than a sprite was already approaching her! She quickly used her changeling ability to *fade into the foliage* to help her hide.

The man stopped at the edge of the water. His looming posture was meant to intimidate and it worked. He began to speak to the shaking nymph and she flinched, stepped back and nearly fell on her butt in the water when the edges of the ice smacked the back of her legs.

Mira struggled through the terror she was feeling. Last time she'd seen this guy, he'd picked up her, Chase, and his motorcycle and threw them all into a tree. She'd managed to hop off and avoid the disaster, but she knew that likely only happened because Bear had wanted it to. Worse, there was something about the way Bear looked at her when she was talking to John that she didn't like. She decided her luck could hardly be worse, and in fact had expected him to be out here. He was waiting for her last time, after all. But a girl could hope that John had sent someone else to watch the park.

The nymph gritted her teeth and stared up at the giant werewolf.

"Well?" Bear said in a low rumble that turned the marrow to icy jelly in a way the half-frozen lake water never could.

She couldn't keep her teeth from chattering. *"I-I'm ready to talk. To John. I want to work this out."*

Somewhere under the big, ragged beard there was a wet glint of bad teeth and worse breath. "John's not here. You could work things out with me and then I could take you to him." His deep voice was soft. The sound carried, but his words blurred due to distance. Less and Rey couldn't hear from where they stood.

Less, standing on the other side of the pond, tapped his control of air to bring him the conversation. Bear's deep baritone sharpened from a distant murmur to the point he Winter King could make out what was being said.

Mira steeled herself as best she could, but her body was coiled, ready to dive below the ice and water at a moment's notice. "No," she said. *"John wants his Oracle, then he needs to come here. Bring your pack. My message is for all tonight."*

"John Hells Teeth will be very angry if you attempt to run from us again, little creature," Bear rumbled. "And then we will no longer play nice with you. We will take you and make you ours until you break."

Mira began to wonder if this whole thing was a terrible idea, that maybe hiding from them until they went

away was less likely to end badly. She closed her eyes to regain her composure. Her tone became subdued. *"I-I'm not going anywhere. This is my place. I'll wait for you right here."*

"I don't think so. I want you where I know you won't be running away. Come here. Then I'll call Hells Teeth."

This wasn't the plan, Mira thought. She looked around worried, scared and uncertain now what to do. Bear's eyes narrowed while he waited her answer. Mira put a hand to her throat as she remembered what happened last time she let a werewolf get close to her.

"No. I'll begin soon whether John is here or not. You decide whether he'll be happy to miss this or not. I don't care."

Bear growled as he considered his options. "Fine. But I'm not taking my eyes off you, creature. He dug a cell phone out of his sweat pants and called Hells Teeth.

Mira was sorely tempted to use her power over water to break up the ice and give herself a platform to sit upon further away from shore, but she wasn't sure how long she'd have to keep up the magic, and it was tiring stuff. She'd rather wait and use it to help her hold the wolves under water, so she bided her time.

Something touched her below the surface of the pond, a reassuring grasp on her leg. A vampire was letting her know she wasn't alone even in the shadows. She smiled inwardly and stopped shaking.

It wasn't long before John Hells Teeth arrived. He'd already been on his way.

John tried to look casual as he approached the lake, but Mira could tell by the spring in his step he was excited. With him was another young man who was better dressed than the others. Mira had heard his name as Josef. A fourth was there as well, someone hardly more than a teenager, she stuck close to John. Mira frowned. A female in his pack? She'd never seen a female before. And where was the older guy, the one that looked like he was middle aged?

"I asked for your pack to assemble," she told him without greeting.

John shrugged and smiled. "The others are here making sure we won't be disturbed."

Mira was alarmed. The rest of his pack was prowling around!

She swallowed hard and then continued. *"Fine. My first vision concerns you specifically."* She raised her hand toward him for him to take and gave him her best 'come hither' look.

Seducing John into coming into the icy water with her turned out to be simple. The werewolf had always been interested in her and seeing her like this, despite the cold, had been a turn on from the moment he saw her tonight.

"Boss I don't think that's a good idea," Bear said.

"Shut up Bear. She's an Oracle, one of Gurim's chosen."

He took her hand and waded into the frigid waters, shivering with the shock of water. His legs began to cramp almost immediately but he ignored it.

She took a step back, crunching thin ice out of her way, then drew him to her. Utter stillness pervaded the night for an extended moment as John stared into the nymph's dark, nearly black eyes.

When it happened, it was with a sudden violence that took John Hells Teeth utterly by surprise. Mira's form

crystallized and exploded, sending shards of ice in all directions and leaving her body hard as living ice. He didn't have a chance to recover before she pivoted and attempted to throw him bodily toward the center of the lake, but he somehow managed to slip her grasp.

Mira's elementals took immediate action, however. Two grabbed John and slammed him through the ice. A third formless, water elemental rose from the water near the shore and this one looked similar to Mira's icy form but less solid and more transparent. She was assisted by a fourth and final elemental in seizing Bear. Together they managed to heft the giant and throw him into shallow water.

The werewolves didn't take it standing still. John burst through he shattered the ice and immediately had his head above water, though the two elementals barred his way to the shore. He fixed a murderous glare upon Mira and growled, "CALL THEM OFF AND CEASE YOUR RESISTANCE!" The power of his voice and will shook the air between he and Mira.

Mira screamed and pressed her hands to her temple. "*No! I will not!*" she screamed and kept screaming No!

Bear surged to his feet and swung a massive fist into the Elemental Ally and managed a shattering blow that seemed to warp her form a little. The woman leaped into the water to attack the Elemental Ally as well, transforming into a monstrous beast mid-air. She came down on it and began shredding it with ferocious growls while the elemental creature emitted a high-pitched, eerie scream of pain. Josef followed suit and added his own beast form and tearing teeth. The Elemental Ally screams faded and she began to fall.

Hidden under the water, Carson lunged at John's leg and managed to grab the werewolf's ankle. A split second later, Remy tapped into his vampiric strength and dragged Hell's Teeth beneath surface and into the deep, dark water.

Rey knew she'd failed at being stealthy, having heard the swish of the bush's branches as she brushed against them. She knew the entire Pure pack wouldn't be at the pond, so she looked around to see if there was anyone nearby who might have heard her. Off to her right, she saw a wolf moving through the brush, stalking her. That was bad, she knew. Very bad. She gave up all pretense of being stealthy. She dropped her rifle and invoked the Contract of Elegant Protection while she sprinted for where at least some of the Storm Front pack would be waiting - she hoped.

The wolf's ears perked up at Rey's movement and it gave chase, just barely managing to catch up to her and bite the back of her thigh. For the moment, Rey was not impeded but she was painfully aware of the wolfish tactic of taking small bites and nips in order to bring down prey.

Meanwhile, Less focused his attention on his control of the air while he waded into the lake, breaking the thin ice with a crackling crunch as he moved. He altered the air currently to shove at the werewolves and knock them off balance, thereby assisting the elementals. He had the satisfaction that his contribution was likely to tip the scales more in favor of his allies. Then a prickly feeling at the back of his neck made him glance behind him. There, pacing menacingly near the shore of the small lake was a yellow-eyed wolf. It was intelligent and smart enough to realize there were hidden dangers in the water, so it did not yet dare to step go in after Less for now.

Remy acted with supernatural reflexes to immobilize the werewolf alpha and keep him down beneath the surface while Carson assisted. Minerva yet hung back while the three thrashed and twisted in the icy lake.

Less gritted his teeth against the cold water and slid neck-deep into the pond. His wool sweater tugged him down as he swam to the middle of the pond. Keeping his eyes on the battle, he continued to whip the air up around the werewolves fighting the water elementals. The wind buffeted against them from one side, then the other, and sent sprays of water into their faces. It was a trivial matter to coax a breeze to remain with him, swirling gently around his head. As the battle raged on, Less allowed himself to sink below the frigid surface and the air under his control followed. The trapped breeze kept the water of the pond at bay as he

floated under the surface. Through the shifting surface of his diving bubble, he could make out the distorted images of the werewolves but the elementals were indistinct. He focused on maintaining control of the winds and tried to remain calm. He knew vampires had John Hells Teeth in their dead grip in the murky depths below him and it was not a comfortable feeling.

Rey continued to sprint toward her werewolf allies, hoping her attacker's attention would be so focused on catching her that she might be able to lead him into an ambush. The wolf was pressed hard enough to keep up that it could not launch a new attack. It gleefully followed at an easy lope, expecting Rey to tire from exhaustion and blood loss long before it would lose her trail. However, park wasn't so big that a full sprint wouldn't soon find Rey amid allies.

Three elementals worked together to get the huge Bear off of Mira's Elemental Ally before she was completely overwhelmed. Together, they pummeled and shoved at Bear. By luck or intent, they managed a synchronized attack that, together with Less's Air Control spell, slammed the giant so hard he left the water, sailed over Mira's head, and landed with a crackling splash into deeper water near John Hells Teeth.

The Elemental Ally, wounded terribly, fled to Mira's side several yards away and prepared an all-out defense. She was pursued by Josef and the young female werewolf who sensed the Elemental was close to defeat. The female werewolf-beast continued to savage the Elemental Ally, tearing her to pieces. It disincorporated, melting into the water of the pond from which she was born.

John Hells Teeth exploded into Gauru war form and struggled to free himself from Remy and Carson, who only tightened their grip. The werewolf was kept firmly below the surface.

Josef erupted into his near-human form and attempted to grab Mira, but she proved far too nimble and slipper to get hold of. After evading him, she reached out and touched the chunks of brittle ice that now floated everywhere around her. Her smooth, statuesque form then grew even colder. Razor sharp crystals formed all over her body and she found that she had to keep in continuous motion or risk flash freezing the water around her. She had no desire to turn into a growing block of ice, but the defensive benefits were undeniable.

Bear surged back against the elementals harrying him. Tired of playing around, he changed to his beast form. Instantly changing into something the size of a small car, he caused a water surge that sent a wave in all directions that shattered ice as it went. Unable to touch the bottom of the pond now, he thrashing his way toward shore, tearing at a water elemental as he went.

Less saw the huge werewolf plunge through the surface of the water not far away. When it transformed into the massive, hideous beast he felt the wave push past him. Bubbles of white air filled the water around him as he thrashed and fought back towards the shore. Less grabbed at those bubbles, coalescing them into a pit of air beneath him in the water. The more Bear struggled, the more air his huge paws added to the bubble and deepened the pit.

Rey continued to sprint toward the the perimeter of the area around the pond. Some members of Storm Front had to be there. If not, it was on to Plan C.

Beneath the surface, Minerva approached her coterie members and the werewolf they held immobile between them. Without a word, she thrust the combat knife in her hand deep into Hell's Teeth's belly, giving it a vicious twist as Carson had taught her to do.

Remy squeezed his captive with monstrous power, forcing a rush of air bubbles from the werewolf alpha's lungs.

John twisted in rage, now nearly panicked by his situation. He burst free from the combined grip of the two vampires and lashed out with his claws. He opened Minerva nearly stem to stern!

Three elementals pressed toward bear and, combined with the trap that Less had made using a large and growing bubble of air beneath the huge werewolf, they just managed to wrap pseudopod-like extension around the werewolf. He submerged with a gurgling roar.

The female werewolf and Josef needed to help their alpha and bear but now Mira was between them and their pack mates. The female never paused long enough to think about it and launched herself directly at Mira. Mira didn't move out of the way but merely rammed her own arm into the werewolf's mouth. The wolf bit down hard and shook Mira hard enough to tear chunks of ice-flesh from the nymph. Then the wolf yipped and howled in pain as Mira tore her arm free — bits of wolf tongue and teeth came with, flash frozen. Blood poured from the injured wolf's mouth.

Seeing what happened to his companion, Josef backed off from his intended attack. He smelled blood in the water now, but the icy water was quickly leaching his strength and that of every other warm-blooded thing in it.

Then Stokes made his appearance in the form of a huge grey wolf-monster. It bared its teeth and snapped at Josef, forcing him back toward the nymph. With no other options, Josef closed and, being in beast form himself, launch an attack upon Mira again. He snapped at her, but it was all show and no effect.

Stokes lunged past Josef and made for deep water, seeking John. It was time to bail the young alpha out and get his pack moving.

Meanwhile, the wolf chasing Rey suddenly found himself face to face with two snarling wolves. A wolf with red fur and one with grey darted in behind Rey and planted their legs. They issued their snarling challenge at the Pure werewolf. It skidded to a halt, whipped around and ran toward the pond, now hotly pursued by two of Rey's allies!

Upon hearing the cries of pain from her fellow wolves, the wolf that had stalked the shore near Less ran off to circle the lake and meet its pack mates.

The female that had bit Mira was still coughing blood when the nymph slipped beneath the surface of the water. She erupted beneath the bitch-wolf like a geyser, causing instant frost bites everywhere she touched the wolf, and then tossing her into deep water.

She landed near Bear, who had sunk to the bottom of the pond. He struggled with the barely-visible elementals in the water and managed to break free. Unable to swim, he gathered his feet beneath him and attempted a superhuman leap to clear the pond. He erupted from the pond in an incredible leap that not only broke him through to the surface but he hurtled to land in the shallows near the shore.

Less tried to steady himself in the wild currents in the pond caused by the arrival and departure of the huge werewolves. He wasn't sure who or what was currently flailing at the surface of the pond but he once again opened a pit of air beneath it. The werewolf Mira was fighting suddenly disappeared beneath the surface of the pond.

Remy, with lightning fast skill, drew his sword and thrust it through John's back and out his belly, just missing the spine, and Carson pummeled the werewolf.

Rey allowed herself a split second of gloating before racing at top speed back to the pond. Things had not gone as expected, and she needed to get back there to support her friends. The changeling just hoped the rest of the Storm Front pack saw Lyla going in, and would follow. She didn't know how things were going, and didn't want to be arriving there and finding themselves completely outnumbered.

Minerva looked at the female werewolf and then saw the other werewolves closing on their position.

Discretion being the better part of valor for the young vampire, she decided to back away and prepared to defend herself should they decide to attack her.

With an effort of pure will, John pulls him back off of Remy's sword to find himself sandwiched between two vampires. With death in his eyes, he's about to lay into them when a huge furry head plunges down from above and grabs his shoulder in its jaws. Stokes yanks him back and the two struggle against the water to head back to shore.

Seeing their leader emerge from the water brings some hope back into young Josef. He gropes in the water and catches his female pack mate by the scruff of her neck and pulls her with him back into the shallows. The pack took serious punishment from Mira's ambush so far and at the moment it looked like they might yet escape to like their wounds and plot revenge another day.

Lyla, in her red wolf form, and her young protégé, Kim in her grey wolf form, raced after the fleeing Pure wolf so fast it was a shock when the Pure's Totem Spirit manifested. It reared up, suddenly very much in the physical world, directly in front of Kim. It Kim was unable to stop a collision with it. The young Stormfront wolf was instantly snatched up in metaphysical, barbed chains that felt very, very real and suspended her above the ground. Blood rained down to the ground as she struggled to free herself, yipping and crying out in pain. Her struggles were in vain; she could not free herself.

Lyla smoothly turned and grew into her beast form, sacrificing speed for lethality. She danced around the creature, biting and throwing it off balance, then she circled around it, lining it up for a killing strike.

Mira wasn't about to let her werewolf enemies go. She gestured and raised a wall of frozen water to cut off the wolves' escape. Shocked, and wary of the fact this angry nymph was capable of animating ice and water, the werewolves halted.

Bear looked from the wall to Mira to his nearly-dead alpha and Stokes and back to Mira again. From what he'd seen, this nymph had been behind all of this and now the only way out was through her. He charged her and attacked. He made the same mistake as his pack mate. He bit Mira and ended up with a torn, frozen, bleeding set of jaws to show for it while Mira took only a minor injury to her forearm.

Remy and Carson pursued the fleeing werewolves.

From his vantage point it seemed to Less that all the werewolves had escaped to shallow water. His invisible form surfaced to view the situation and saw the pack cut off by a wall of ice. The savage howls from the other side indicated Bear was on the other side. Less whipped the air off the surface of the wall, wicking away heat and dropping the temperature a few more degrees. He targetting the werewolf helping the wounded John, hoping the elementals would follow his lead in their attack. Wind buffeted Stokes and Mira noticed. She sent her remaining elementals after him and John as well. They closed in a rush.

Between Less's interference and one elemental slamming into Stokes, the elder werewolf was shoved several yards back to deeper water — and practically into Remy and Carson. The vampires would have a clear shot at them unless the werewolves got out of there somehow. The other two water elementals did the same to John Hells Teeth and now that werewolf was off balance in front of two vampires.

Rey shot at the spirit of agony but it was hard to tell if her weapon had much effect. Lyla followed through with a cunning attack. She launched at the off-balance spirit, and crunched down with powerful jaws in a deadly attack that would have bitten in half a human being. The spirit was tougher, but it still suffered greatly as whirling, living chains shattered and flew to pieces under the power of Lyla's teeth. It shrieked like tearing metal.

Rey caught glimpses of shadows heading toward the edge of the small lake where Mira and the vampires battled werewolves. Stormfront had begun to sneak in, having smelled blood in the air.

Then the Agony totem spirit of the Pure pack, out of sheer cruelty or venomous spite, attacked the injured Kim Carlson. Chains impaled the wolf and tore up the ground. Blood sprayed Rey and Lyla, and the wolf let out a scream that ended in a human sound that cut off with a gurgle. Kim's form reverted to human and she slumped limp and unmoving in the spiked chain bindings.

The beast that was Lyla howled long and mournfully in ear-splitting volume. Across the park howls joined hers in reflected pain and loss that turned to rage. Stromfront wanted blood.

John Hellsteeth was out of his mind. He saw a barrier in front of him so he turned on his pursuers regardless what Stokes wanted to save him. A frenzied, mad creature intent only on killing the nearest enemy, he attacked Remy with tooth and claw, heedless of his own safety.

Stokes cocked his head, listening to the howls surrounding the park. He growled something that sounded like a primal language at Bear, who was still shaking his head in pain. He glanced at his alpha and back at Stokes.

Stokes wasn't going to wait for Bear to make up his mind. They had to leave and right now. John was going to buy them time, but it wasn't going to be enough if they didn't flee immediately. Unfortunatley, the elementals and ice wall were between him and escape. He was slowed by the cold water, maneuvering around the elementals, and then smashing into the ice wall; he didn't get as far as the shore. The young wolf who had battled Mira, however, backed away covering Stokes' back. Anyone trying to get to stokes would have to get through her first. Josef, realizing he was no match at all for Mira, backed off and joined her.

The wolf that had raced around from the other side of the lake finally arrived, appearing not far away and running along the shore as fast as he could scramble, and the young wolf that had harried Rey arrived from the opposite direction. The Hells Teeth pack was gathering its strength.

Mira wasn't interested in allowing John to buy time for his pack. He'd hurt her, harassed her, and now he'd hurt Remy. "*Stay away from him!*" she hissed. A spear of ice appeared in her hand. Less was close enough to her to recognize the look in her eye. He'd seen it before, almost a year ago when she went after a murderer who'd hurt her friends. There was Something Else running the show now. The thing that reminded him of his Queen of Ice. A large, thick chunk of ice formed beneath her feet and lifted her up out of the water, and she surfed it the short distance to John. There she slammed her spear of ice through his heart.

John Hellsteeth bellowed in bestial rage and pain as blood gushed from his mouth and the gaping hole Mira had just made in his chest. He sank to his knees then transformed into a man and fell face first into the water. The blood-spattered ice princess *laughed* madly and turned toward the remaining pack members.

Bear howled the pain of the loss of their alpha and his howl was echoed by the rest of the Pure. He would have charged Mira right then, but he was too big and heavy and had been too long in the cold water. If he went for her, he'd be in water too deep and would sink into the muddy bottom. Snarling and snapping he retreated to shore with Stokes, Josef and the surviving members of his pack.

Less licked several pairs of blue lips through chattering teeth. He could taste the sorrow of the werewolf pack and knew it was his time to strike. He focused on Bear and tried to amplify the anguish the brute felt at his leader's death. The Winter King's power washed over Bear and werewolf began to howl long and mournful. He was unwilling to even move further out of the deathly cold waters, caring not even to spare himself that. Bear slumped, unmoving.

Remy and Carson closed on Bear. Remy drew blood with his sword while Carson laid into the werewolf with

his fists and feet.

Seeing Kim on the ground spurred Rey into a run. Let the rest of the pack deal with the Pure and their totem spirit. They had no time to save Kim - but she did.

Lyla leaped and dodged the agony spirit again, trying to expose another opening. Again she managed to keep it off balance as she leaped and circled it.

Elementals closed on Bear like angry hornets egged on by the icy cold of Mira's fury. They weren't trying to subdue or grab their quarry this time. They only wanted it to hurt. The water elementals slammed into Bear relentlessly crashing against his body and driving him into the ground. Bear, overwhelmed with Sorrow, could not fight for himself.

Stokes took off. He'd given his order to Bear to retreat and damn Bear if he wouldn't listen. The female werewolf and Josef followed him closely, and they were soon joined by the remaining two wolves looking to reunite with the pack.

The Agony spirit didn't take Lyla's harassment lying down; it attacked her as viciously as it could in an attempt to drive her away. The Stormfront alpha bitch proved too agile for it to inflict anything but a minor injury, drawing blood but not slowing her down. Lyla's response tore into it, but she could not come close to killing it. After that, the spirit disincorporated and fled, probably to return to the Hells Teeth pack.

Mira was not interested in mercy and so she joined Remy and Carson's attack upon Bear. The elementals parted to let her through and once more she rammed her ice spear into a werewolf body.

After that, the battle was over. With Remy, Carson, the elementals and Mira determined to kill him, and Bear unable to defend himself, he was slaughtered in short order. The pack of Pure ran, hotly pursued by Rey's allies in the Stormfront pack at four-legged speeds.

Rey raced to join her friends and arrived in time to see the Pure fleeing right into the Stormfront pack and engage in a running battle. Lyla had reverted to human form and began desperate first aid treatment to stop Kim's bleeding.

The loss of Kim and Lyla to the fighting force of Stormfront greatly reduced their fighting ability since Lyla was their deadliest hunter and Kim their strongest warrior in battle. Stormfront and Hells Teeth were evenly matched in manpower. However, the Hells Teeth pack were tired and cold and some carried wounds. They were shaken by the loss of their alpha and pack beta and didn't have the stomach for a fight to the death. Stokes, an elder Pure who'd considered his time to serve as an alpha to be years past called upon his spirit powers to force negotiation. Chaska called on his spirit powers maintain Stormfront's upper hand.

They struck a deal.

While Mira slowly came back to herself, the motley regrouped with Remy's coterie. Two of them had been badly injured, though vampire resilience meant they were already healed — just rather hungry. Lyla carried Kim to the pond's shore there while she waited for her mate to return. Lyla said nothing, though it was obvious she'd been crying. Kim was someone she treasured and had almost lost.

Chaska arrived a few minutes after that. He raised his hand in greeting. "The battle is over. The Pure were much stronger and numerous than anticipated but we have won victory here tonight. Their pack is sworn to leave Mizuko alone."

Mira looked sharply at him for using the wrong name, but Chaska didn't seem to know any better.

"Apparently the idea of using her as their own pet oracle was an idea their previous leader had come up with that the current one had considered madness. They no longer have any interest in pressing anyone into

service for them. Recently they had annexed this park and north to the railroad station to their territory. They have ceded this to my pack to do with as we wish. I could not force him to abandon Mythic altogether," Chaska sighed. "Often our battles are waged as much with words as with weapons, and my best hunter was needed here."

Chaska crouched next to Lyla and tenderly put a hand on Kim's comatose form. Lyla looked back at him and backed off enough to let Chaska pick Kim up.

"I hope Kim's recovery goes well," Rey replied. "I'd like to meet the pack who moves into this territory."

Chaska told Lyla, "I need to do this at him."

Lyla put a hand on his shoulder. He relaxed slightly as if there were some tension between them. "I'll be right behind you." She turned to Rey as Chaska and other members of his pack, still in wolf form, walked into the dark. "That will be up to them," Lyla said, "but I'll mention it to them."

Mira looked stubborn. *"I want no werewolves near me or my pond."* She folded her arms and met the eyes of anyone who would challenge her position.

"Why?" Rey asked.

"This place is special to me," Mira replied. *"And this is the closest way for me to get to refuge."* She looked at Lyla with mistrust. There was something in her eyes when she looked at the powerful werewolf female. Although her posture was challenging, Lyla's gaze was the only one Mira was specifically avoiding.

"We can talk about that later," Rey says in a calm, let's-not-get-into-a-fight-about-it-now tone. She knew what was bothering Mira, but now was neither the time nor the place to get into it.

Lyla agreed. "Yes, we can. There will be a pack nearby. If you don't want them in this park then you can tell them so and work it out among yourselves. I'll give Rey some means of contacting them. Stormfront's job here is done and my pack won't be back without an invitation. But unless you want to see the Pure return, I suggest you think about working something out with the your new neighbors."

Lyla shifted her gaze to the three vampires, then swept her eyes over the three motley members. "Those Pure that secured their escape have an adjacent territory and now they will have rivals with this park as possible contested area unless you take steps to prevent that. If you don't want to cooperate with us, you have other options. One is to ignore it. The Pure have sworn off you, Mira. I have no reason to believe they have any intentions toward you. The Pure and my people will clash as we always have, but this need not concern you. Another option is to establish this as your own territory — and defend it against the new pack and the Pure alike. Think about it. Discuss your options with your friends. You don't have to decide anything tonight."

Mira felt an urge to be defiant, but she realized it was childish to argue, even if Lyla's tone was pushy and condescending to her ears. Since she didn't trust her mouth to betray her feelings, she nodded to Lyla and let the matter alone.

Less pulled himself out of the freezing water and huddled under a tree within hearing distance of the discussion. He was shivering uncontrollably and would have rather taken the Gate to the motley hollow but he felt he should stay for the wrap-up so he could represent the Duchy if needed. Though he tried to pay attention, his mind wandered. He had seen his Queen in Mira's features again and he could feel the hard corners of the snuff box which held her gift of life. He suddenly felt deeply sorry for poor Mira. She was trying so hard to be an independent woman, but so many things interfered. Her Keeper had made her his tool of entrapment, the Ice Queen had placed her icicle in Mira's heart, Veridia had used her, and the vampire Xavier had rewritten her mind. For this, as the King of Sorrow, he would do anything in his power to protect her.

"Good night, Lyla," Rey said, giving her friend a hug. "I'll call you soon."

Lyla bid them all goodnight and left.

Mira finally noticed Less shivering nearby. Her eyebrows went up. "*Oh Less! I'm sorry. Please let me help.*" She raised a hand and water squished out of Less's soaked garments in a stream, gathered itself into a ball hovering about three feet of the ground, and then sailed back to the pond from which it came. Mira repeated the same favor for Meronet, Remy and Carson. While it left them still damp, at least no one but Mira was dripping wet. And of course Mira didn't mind.

The nymph turned to Remy, Carson and Minerva and gave them each a very grateful hug for their help, then gave Rey and Less the same.

Rey watched the vampires leave, and when they were halfway to the parking lot, she said to her friends "We need to find another member for the motley. One that has healing skills." She grimaced as the bites in the back of her thigh twinged.

Mira seconded that motion. She held up her bloodied hands and forearms for a moment, then signed. "Yes! I agree. I'll heal this if I can get to goblin fruit, but there is no guarantee that I'll be able to get that when I need it."

Less followed along silently. As far as personal safety went, a changeling could find a far better motley to join than the Glymjacks.

"What about that girl that helped me when I got poisoned? Does she do healing?" Mira signed.

"Belle?" Rey signed in return, favoring her right leg. "I don't know, but we could find out."

"I guess another option is for one of us to pick up some better skills at medicine, healing, and maybe harvesting fruit specifically good at healing," Mira signed. "What would make you two happiest? Finding us a specialist, or picking up the skills ourselves?"

"I'm going to brush up on my first aid," Rey signed, "but given what we encounter, I think we really do need someone who can heal. Harvesting healing fruit is all well and good, but few of them can be preserved without losing their efficacy. Plus, there's no guarantee we'd be able to find the fruit when we need it to begin with. That leaves adding someone to the motley - unless the two of you are liked well enough by Spring to earn their healing Contracts."

"If we can't find a Spring Courtier that we like or that is willing to join us, we could also look into Goblin Contracts that enable healing. There may be consequences to using such, as there always is with Goblin Contracts, but I believe that they are also more powerful than Spring Court Healing," Mira signed. "I remember back during the last war there were some injuries that were sustained, the truly devastating kind similar to the one I'm still suffering from thanks to the werewolf run-in I had a few days ago, that even Spring Court healing cannot repair. It might be worth looking into, or if we expand the motley, we shouldn't ignore non-Spring changelings that might have these Goblin Contracts of healing."

"True." Rey looked at Less. "With the info you and your Wardens have collected, you'll probably be able to come up with a list for us to start with, right?"

Less tried to hide smiles. "Yes. Yes, I do." He also had information on sellers of Goblin Contracts.

Mira nodded. "Good," she signed. "Let's go over your list very soon."