

February 12th, 2012

### **The Servitor**

Mizuko had gone to the Hollow via her favorite door, the old one at the bottom of Ottowi Pond. Since it was frozen over, it was a little challenging, but the ice nymph claimed dominion over ice and water. She simply commanded it to roll back for her and it did. She descended into the frozen waters and her power protected her from the cold and even kept her dry. Then she was in the bright, clear waters of what she truly considered Home, the motley's Hollow.

Many months ago she'd promised her friends she would build up the strength to activate a contract that would enable her to raise a guardian to protect the Hollow. At last, she was ready.

But this wouldn't be just a servant of Water such as protected Simon during the closing Battles of the war with the Goblin King. What she would raise up would be a creature with a mind and will. It would have a body and a purpose, as well. And for some amount of time, it would be able to rise from the Spring itself to perform its duty.

Her duty. Mizuko knew that any such being born of her power would reflect in some way who she was, too. A sister in spirit if not in flesh. The intelligence, strength and will of this creature would be born out of the strength of Mizuko's own Wyrd and her talent in manipulating her power. She would awaken this spirit and feed it the power it needed week after week. It would be the same elemental because it would be of the same waters and the same location. Mizuko felt she could think of the elemental in no other way but as a person she was about to awaken, not just some *thing*.

Mizuko sat at the edge of the pond for hours that day, staring into the waters and idly playing with Ollie. She told herself she was trying to prepare, but the truth was she was putting it off. Finally, she shook her head and laughed at herself.

There's no time like now. She raised her hand of the water, focused her will and her power and murmured, "Rise."

There was no moment of anticipation, no hesitation at all. The water rose in front of her and Mizuko stepped back both surprised and afraid before she stopped herself. She blinked at the being that now stood upon the placid surface of the spring as if it was solid as oak floors. She wasn't certain if the creature was real so she reached out and touched it.

The elemental being's surface was wet and rippled under Mizuko's touch. Mizuko withdrew her hand and stared back at the elemental.

"*You... look like me.*" Mizuko said, staring. The elemental had indeed taken a female form. Though made entirely of water, her translucent features did resemble the nymph herself.

It nodded at her. "By thy power, I am given awareness. And for a time, life. For that I will obey thy request."

Mizuko marveled a little at the utter calm of the elemental's voice. The creature had instantly grasped the situation. Its hand language! The reality of it was staggering and Mizuko reeled mentally as she took in what she'd really done. For this short period of time it was as if she had created a child! A child likely far quicker of mind and powerful of body than anyone she knew. Or... was it that the elemental had always been here and that Mizuko had merely awoken it from some kind of slumber? But if that were true, then why did it resemble herself so much?

Mizuko took the time she needed to recover her thoughts and her purpose. The elemental waited with endless patience. Then Mizuko signed experimentally.

"Yes, I understand," the elemental spoke, signing at the same time. "What is thy request?"

Mizuko stared some more. When she continued, she spoke slowly and carefully. *"I will ask you to watch over this place and should any interloper appear other than those who are my friends, I want you to eject them from this Hollow if you can or defeat them if you can not."*

It nodded. "Over time, much of thy power shall be sacrificed to allow me this. But that need not be."

Mizuko nodded. *"It need not. Shall we bargain then?"*

The elemental smiled. "If it be thy wish. I have three requests, then. Meet them, and our pact is done so that for as long as I am called by thee, I will hear and answer."

Mizuko waited while the elemental considered. She didn't have long to wait.

"First, I wish a name. Second, I wish a promise of thee, a pledge to summon no other water elemental but I in this place."

Mizuko nodded. After some thought, she said, *"I think Beautiful Spear should be the name of the guardian of this place."*

The elemental tilted her head as she considered. "In the old tongue, such a name was not uncommon. I will answer to the old version. Call me Rhonwen."

Mizuko studied the elemental. *"Rhonwen? All right. Rhonwen then. As for your second request, I so promise that you shall be the only elemental I summon in this place — so long as you give me no cause to wish to replace you."*

Rhonwen considered then nodded. "This is fair."

Mizuko prompted, *"And your third request?"*

Rhonwen smiled and told her.

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Later, Mizuko visited each of her motley mates to tell them of the new guardian of the Hollow. Rhonwen seemed to know everything she needed to know right from the beginning of her creation and Mizuko assured them the elemental would recognize them as her friends. Rhonwen would not rise from the pond under normal circumstances. In fact, they might never know she was there. But she would always be alert and aware and should danger come, she would rise to it in defense of their Home.

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It was late, nearly 10 pm and some three hours since Mizuko's visit to give him the interesting news about the Hollow when he received his next visitor. Claire was at his door. She was dressed in a dark grey, hooded sweatshirt with a winter vest pulled over top. Her jeans clung to her, but looked worn and ordinary, not fashionably destroyed. Her hands were in her pockets.

She looked up at Less when he opened the door, then quickly left and right to make sure the hallway was empty. Then she dipped her head in a brief bow. "Your highness," she said in a voice barely above a whisper. "Have you a moment?"

Less tossed his nibbed pen carelessly down on the piles of documents that covered his new desk. He rubbed

his eyes and he was suddenly aware that his bare feet were cold. "Of course, Claire. I cannot deny you a moment." He pulled the wool blanket that was draped over the back of his chair around his shoulders. "What is it?"

She looked up and down the hallway again. "May I come in?"

"Yes, yes," said Less apologetically, beckoning her into the office.

Once inside with the door closed, Claire tried to relax a little. She pulled her hood back, something Less didn't recall her ever doing before, and revealed her actual appearance for the first time. Her eyes were yellow and slitted. She was bald with scales like those of a snake that ran from the crown of her head down the back of her neck.

Less was taken aback by the revealing of her face. He had grown so accustomed to the mystery that he nearly turned away. His mouth dropped open.

Claire spoke in her usual raspy voice. "A personal matter has come up, which I would not normally bother you with, your highness. But I feel that in this case, leaving it unsaid could damage our working relationship in the future.

"You know of my friendship with Richard of the Autumn Court." It was a statement and didn't require a response. She continued. "We still speak now and again and recently he has come to me with an offer of a personal nature. He has asked me to join his motley. Normally, this would not be significant to you. But I wanted to tell you *who* was in his motley. Richard shares a Hollow in the Hedge with them, the primary door of which resides in his current... ah, residence. The two other members of the motley are Queen Veridia and her sister, Lydia."

Less was surprised for a second time in as many seconds. Though he knew Claire and Richard were on good terms, she had not mentioned him very often since the dissolution of the Dusk Court. He realized it irked him that she was considering joining his motley. It helped him a great deal to confide in her about the trials of his office and this would change that. It was also hard for him to imagine Veridia and Lydia belonging to *any* motley. Though the purpose of motlies was security, he did not think that the Autumn Queen and her mad sister would be very good house-mates.

"I am thinking of accepting his invitation. But should I do so, I would ask you to excuse me from any matter of sensitive political nature that might come up between Winter and Autumn. I think we are currently on good terms, but if in the future that changes, I would like to not be caught in the middle. I'm sure you understand the position I would be in?" And of course she referred vaguely to the fact that Less himself had ranking members of Autumn in his own motley.

Less looked down at his paperwork and nodded, taking in the information. "Yes, of course. You must do what is best for you. Please keep me informed of your final decision." Though he never expected Claire to betray the secrets of her Motley, it would likely be useful in the long term to have her so close to the Autumn Queen.

Claire watched him closely as he spoke. "Are you certain, my king?" she asked gently. "I would like... I would take no offense if you asked me to turn down Richard's offer."

"No, no," said Less. "A motley is for security, and perhaps a form of family, not for politics. I myself share one with the Autumn Legate and Witch so I'm sure your proximity to the Autumn Queen will be a boon and not a hindrance. For me, anyway. I trust Richard's company will make up for Veridia's ... temperament. Quite frankly, what could we be doing here," and Less gestured with his hands to encompass the whole Winter Court, such that it was, "that could be considered *sensitive*? Perhaps the committee I am about to strike on the proper way to refer to Motley in the plural? I am very sure we will manage."

Claire bowed. "Thank you, my king. I will weigh his offer carefully." She replaced her hood and Less caught a flash of white teeth as she smiled. "I look forward hearing to your new committee's findings."

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The Hedge was a scary place, especially to one as small as he was. It was even scarier than the Shadow, at times, he thought as he crept through the brambles. But he had no choice about being here, not really. A year ago, that man - he knew now it was one of the Gentry - had taken her. He tried to follow, dashing through that hole between the worlds just before it closed, but they'd moved too fast and he lost them. He couldn't go back without her. He had to find her and help her.

His long search had brought him to this place, and he almost wished it hadn't. There was something *wrong* about it. The air was laced with the scent of old blood and sewer sludge, but then his nose caught the traces of a familiar though almost forgotten smells of a mortal city. His eyes widened. Could this be a way out of the Hedge? He didn't know how or why, but he knew she was close. He just felt it.

He sniffed the air and moved forward silently, slipping between the plants to toward what he hoped was the gate. Three steps onto the path and he pulled up short with a look of disgust. Dark green slime tracked along the ground and he'd stepped in it. He didn't need to think hard to realize this was the source of the horrid smell. Normally he would have stopped to investigate, but he couldn't tarry.

He'd followed the path a way, thinking about the slime. There was something familiar about it, and it unnerved him. Well, he was always scared in the Hedge, but this was worse than usual. He was thinking so hard about it that he nearly tripped over the body. He jumped back and stared at the corpse. It was a Changeling, one whose skin looked like pebbled leather, reminding him of one of her belts. The Changeling was covered in that dark green slime. He took a step closer and saw the corpse's head was cracked open, and he knew without checking its brain was gone.

He shuddered and backed away as he looked around frantically. Brainbugs. He'd encountered them before, having narrowly escaped being one of their meals. And then it hit him. The trail of slime was heading in the direction of the gate. If those things got out into the mortal world...

His first instinct was to turn and run, but his memories of her kept him from fleeing. He needed to get help, because it was something she would have done. Find someone stronger who might be able to stop the bugs from overrunning everything. He picked up his pace, first trotting, then full out running to find that gate.

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"Wake up, Miss. Wake up!" The man's voice cut through her tired brain, his upper class British accent teasing her memory. She felt something tap her forehead. "You have to get up before they get you and your roommate!"

Mizuko groaned, then shot to a sitting position at the sound of a strange voice in her bedroom. She gathered her power as she looked around. Adrenalin was quickly cutting through the fog of sleep and the putrid smell of rotting meat helped to sharpen her senses as well. But the room was dark and she could identify no other person nearby. "*What! Who are you?*"

"You must hurry, or they'll kill and eat your friend's brain!"

Mizuko saw a small dark shape dart out the door and out of sight. Her breath caught in her throat as sudden panic struck deep inside her chest, making her blood run cold. She'd faced murderers and ogres and elementals, goblins, and true fae, but the thing that really upset her was heralded by the pitter-patter of tiny feet scrambling for the shadows. She clutched the bedding tight against her chest for protection as she

screamed, "*Rats!!! Amber! Amber, there are talking, English rats in the apartment!*" at the top of her lungs.

"I am not a rat!" The small shape reappeared in her doorway and she could vaguely see outline of a cat-like tail. "Well I never, insulting the person trying to save your life." Suddenly the small form jumped, turned and hissed. "Brainbug! Hurry, Miss."

A moment later, Mizuko heard Amber shriek in horror. "'Zuko! Help!"

Amber's panicked voice shook Mizuko out of her stunned inaction. Mizuko shook her head and blinked at the cat, then she flung her covers and rose from her bed. She raced for the door and threw it open. Amber slept downstairs, and Mizuko stumbled and fell down the circular case when she took the steps too fast, but she didn't slow down. She headed directly to her friend's room.

Three steps from the bedroom door Mizuko slipped in something on the floor, but she caught herself and kept moving forward. Amber was trapped in her bed, covered with dark slime and half a dozen large, fleshy slug-like creatures.

Mizuko snarled and leapt to Amber's rescue, landing on the bed, then began kicking the bugs aside aiming for whichever one looked like it was in position to hurt Amber the worst. "*I hate bugs!*"

Amber's squirming around, frantically trying to get away from the brainbugs, made it very difficult for Mizuko to attack the creatures safely, let alone stay standing.

"Clever, Miss," the small dark not-rat creature said. "But I suggest grabbing the sheets and pulling them off the bed, then stomping on the foul things."

Mizuko glanced at the cat and then hopped back down, slipping a little in the muck that had dripped onto the floor. "*Augh! Stinks,*" she muttered. Then she grabbed an armful of bedding and gave it the best yank she had to send the gross little monsters flying.

They hit the ground with a disgusting splat but immediately started moving toward the bed and Mizuko.

Mizuko made a face, then grabbed Amber's hand and pulled her roughly to her feet. "*Time to move. You, too, magic talking rat!*" She propelled Amber toward the doorway out of the bedroom. The tiny creature was already out of the room and waiting for the two women at the bottom of the stairs to the second floor. In the faint light of the living room, the nymph could see it was a tiny cat, it's fur so dark it almost disappeared into the shadows.

Mizuko blinked, then slapped the light switch on the way by so she could better see what was in her apartment. "*You're not a rat at all!*" she accused. "*Why have you let these... things into my home?*"

The cat's tail twitched. "I told you I wasn't a rat," he replied with quiet dignity. "And rather than accusing me of things I haven't done, you might want to consider killing those brainbugs before they get out of your apartment and eat your neighbors."

Mizuko spotted movement out of the corner of her eye, and when she turned her head to look she got a good view on the things that had invaded her home. They were lumps of sickly pale flesh that crept along the floor like slugs. Centered in their "face" was a what could only be described as horrifying replica of female genitalia flanked pair two pairs of shining brown eyes.

Mizuko hesitating staring in horrified fascination. Then she released a portion of her power. Frost instantly sheathed her otherwise naked body, crackling furiously. Armed with deadly frost, the ice nymph advanced on the nearest bug, intent on stomping the abomination to death.

When her foot hit the top of it, the slime coating the creature froze and her foot slid off it without doing much damage. It continued to move forward, though its advance was slowed.

Mizuko's eyes widened in surprise. Her deathly cold could kill a human being who was exposed to it more than a few seconds, but the slime coating acted like armor when it froze. *"Cat! How can these things be killed?"*

"Perhaps something bigger and heavier than your foot," he suggested. "Or fire. They smell like something out of a sewer. Maybe they're giving off methane."

"Fire?" Mizuko looked greatly perturbed. *"But I don't have any fire. I'm a water nymph."*

"Zuko?" Amber offered. "I think we need help."

Mizuko looked at her and nodded. *"We can ask the others to help. Come on!"*

Amber grabbed Mizuko by the arm. "Stop! Stop Zuko. I can't run around town in a nighty with a naked elf and a... ah talking cat. I'll freeze."

Mizuko made a face. Sleeping in the buff apparently had disadvantages. More importantly, it meant they had to make a run for clothes in both her room and Amber's.

"Perhaps you have some matches in the kitchen?" The cat's left ear twitched.

Mizuko looked blank.

Amber piped up, "I have a lighter!" She ran over and grabbed her coat off the metal hooks near the door. Deciding wearing it might make her feel a little less vulnerable, she pulled it on and jammed a hand in her left pocket. She produced a chrome Zippo with an imprint of a wolf's head. With a grin, she tossed it to Mizuko who caught it.

Mizuko looked from the lighter to the cat. *"But what do I do, just hold it up to a bug? What if they bite me? Are they poisonous?"*

"I have not had the opportunity to question them about their toxicity." The tiny grey cat's tail curled around its feet as it sat and watched Mizuko and Amber. "The flame may need to touch them for them to be harmed. Or perhaps the fire might burn along the trails of slime like gasoline and engulf them."

Mizuko stared at the cat and then at the lighter in her hand. *"But cat, I live here. If they burn like gasoline then I will burn down the building and then Remy will be angry with me."*

"Um. Zuko?" Amber jabbed Mizuko's side with her finger to make her pay attention. "If you burn down the building, a lot of people will die."

Mizuko snapped the lighter closed with a dejected, "Oh." Clearly that wasn't desirable either.

"But you can control water, right?" Amber offered. "Can't you just put out whatever fire you start?"

Mizuko replied, *"Only if there is enough water available. Since we aren't standing in water, I'm guessing I can't put out a gasoline fire. Explosion. It would explode wouldn't it? I've never put a lighter to gasoline before."*

Amber growled in frustration. "Look if we keep standing around debating what to do, those things are going to corner us and swarm us. I don't know what they'll do to us after that, but whatever it is I'm sure it will

smell really, really bad. They were going for my face in my bed, so we can't just leave them here. They might hurt people."

Amber ran back to the coat hooks. Mizuko's ugly, puffy winter coat was there, but it was only a waist coat. Instead, she grabbed her own fall coat. It was thin and leather, but it would at least go to Mizuko's thighs. She grabbed it and tossed to Mizuko while she bent down to pick up the cat. She cradled the little guy in her arms.

"We need help and we have to clear the building," she told Mizuko. "So let's get out of here. You hit the fire alarm in the hall and we'll call Rey, okay?"

The tiny cat started, his eyes widened as he looked at Amber. "A very good plan, Miss."

She scratched his ears and massaged his back while she stuffed her feet into a pair of low-heeled slip-on shoes. "And you are a very good kitty, warning us and all."

Mizuko put on the coat, tied it closed then followed Amber out the door. Moments later, alarms rang throughout the building while the two young women and cat beat a hasty retreat.

Mizuko used Amber's phone to call Rey, since hers was in the coat they'd left behind in the apartment.

When Mizuko recognized Rey's answering voice, she said, "*There are bugs in my apartment. Will you come help get rid of them?*"

Amber put her face close to the phone and spoke up. "Horrible, slimy things with faces like, uh, well never mind that. We need fire!"

Mizuko turned away from Amber. "*Quit shouting, Amber. Rey, we have been chased out of the apartment by these things and we don't have any clothes.*"

"I'll be there in five minutes," Rey replied. "I'm at Corazon."

The little cat's ears twitched, and he sat up a little straighter in Amber's arms.

"Okay," Mizuko replied and then closed the phone and put it in Amber's pocket.

Amber smiled at the cat. "You know a nice person when you hear one, don't you? Miss Lafitte's a good friend. You'll like her."

"Lafitte?" The cat blinked at her, and she could feel him start to tremble. "Honoré Lafitte?"

"*Rey Lafitte,*" Mizuko corrected in her attention-getting voice. "*Honoría Lafitte is someone else and she doesn't like being called that anyway. It's Marie.*"

Amber pet the cat some more, then tried to reassure him. "Is this Honoré a friend of yours? Maybe we can help you find her later. There can't be so many Lafitte's in the world that we can't track down one with an unusual first name."

The tiny ball of grey fuzz seemed to deflate. "She is a very dear friend. I've been trying to find her for a long time."

The evacuation of the building continued, people running outside wrapped in blankets or hastily pulled on coats, and in the distance the wail of fire engines could be heard. About half a block away, Mizuko saw Rey's car pull up to the curb. The nymph raised her hand to get Rey's attention and call her over.

Amber turned to face the car. "There she is. That was fast," she told the cat. "See? Good as her word."

Rey pulled two blankets out of the trunk of her car and hurried to join her friends. "You two are lucky I was visiting Alexei..." She slowed when she saw the cat in Amber's arms. "Oh god, that little cat looks just like my Hamilton." She fought back the tears that threatened to run down her cheeks. Why now, of all times, did she have to break down crying because of a cat that was the spitting image of her old familiar.

"*He talks, too,*" Mizuko said.

"Zuko! She'll think your crazy," Amber pointed out. "Everyone knows there's no such thing as talking cats."

The cat made a sound like he was clearing a hairball. "Excuse me, but the *cat* is right here, I'll have you know." He looked at Rey and wiggled his whiskers. "You don't look at all like my Honoré, but I'd know that voice anywhere! Miss? What's happened to you? Why... why you've turned into a changeling of some sort, just like that crazy nymph!" He slithered out of Amber's arms and hopped to the ground, then raced over and head-butted Rey's shin.

"Hamilton!" Rey scooped him up and hugged him tight (but not so tight it hurt), her brambles and thorns surrounding the tiny cat protectively. "I can't believe it's you." She kissed the top of his head. "The link between us was broken when I was Taken. I looked for you everywhere I could when I escaped, but couldn't find you. The pack said you'd disappeared and they hadn't seen you since that night. I've missed you so much!" This time she couldn't hold back the tears, but they were ones of joy, not sadness.

"I followed you, Miss. Right into that horrid place full of thorns and brambles. I last track of you when that demon hauled you away and then I couldn't find a way out." He mewed sadly. "I only just found a way out through an open Gate tonight when I followed these fleshy, crawling creatures to the nymph's apartment."

"I'm so proud of you," she whispered to him as she rubbed her cheek against the top of his head. "But dear gods, you stink." Rey lifted her head to look at her friends. "Introductions are in order, I think, then we go deal with the monsters. Hamilton, this is my friend Mizuko," she said, indicating the nymph, "and her friend Amber. Mizuko and Amber, this is Hamilton. He is one of my dearest friends, and was my familiar before I was Taken."

Mizuko cocked her head curiously, then nodded a greeting at Hamilton. Amber voiced a cheerful, "Hi Hamilton! You have a great name."

Rey smiled at Amber's comment. "Now, about those bugs. How are we going to get back inside with everyone trying to get out?"

Mizuko smiled. She signed, "The elevator. With the fire alarm going off, everyone is supposed to use the stairs. If we use the elevator we can probably not only avoid the people, but make it back up to my floor before the firemen charge up there."

"Not everyone does what they're supposed to do," Rey said and picked up the blankets she'd dropped on the ground with one hand while keeping Hamilton clutched against her with the other. "Here's some blankets to keep you warm until you can get into something more appropriate. Now let's get inside."

Amber tossed one around her shoulders and did the same for Mizuko. Then the small group hurried back into the building and slipped into an elevator, hoping not to be seen. Once the elevator got moving, Amber



said, "So, how do we do this?"

"Without burning the place down," Mizuko signed.

"You've got fire extinguishers in the apartment, right?" Rey asked.

"Quite a few." Amber counted off, "One in the downstairs bath, the kitchen, one in the hallway near the door, one in the master bedroom upstairs and even one near the jacuzzi tub."

"Interesting, and that's a good thing for us tonight. I've got some of those long-tubed butane lighters, so one of us will wield a lighter and the others will have fire extinguishers so we can put the fires out before they get out of hand." She looked down at Hamilton. "You'll keep an eye on where the little buggers are and let us know what they're doing, right?"

"Yes, Miss!" Hamilton chirped.

"I can give myself frost armor," Mizuko signed. "So I should be the one that has to get closest to the bugs. By the way, freezing them doesn't bother them at all. It makes them hard to squish."

"Then you'll be the one to light them up," Rey said with a nod. "Amber, you and I will handle the fire extinguishers. Hamilton, what can you tell us about those things?"

Hamilton provided the rundown. "Well, Miss, of course they are from the Hedge. They have a revolting smell. They prefer to hunt in swarms where they can overpower their prey by sheer numbers. Some of them have these pointy spikes that comes out of their... mouths? It might be a reproductive organ of some sort. Anyway, they appear to be capable of paralyzing a person with that. And they smell."

"So do you," Mizuko pointed out fairly.

Hamilton didn't take it as a mere point of fact. He sneezed derisively and turned his head away, fiercely ignoring Mizuko's existence.

"Don't mind her," Rey whispered to Hamilton. "She means well, but I'll make sure we get cleaned up properly when all this is over, okay?"

Hamilton shook himself and muttered something unflattering about unappreciative nymphs.

Rey bit her lip to smother a laugh as the elevator doors opened on Mizuko's floor. "Let's get this done so we can get out of here."

They approached the apartment door to hear Mizuko's cell phone ringing inside.

Mizuko rattled the doorknob and pounded on the door. Amber sighed and pressed her remote entry key and suddenly the door opened with a snick. She pushed it open and made a beeline for her coat, pulling the phone out of the pocket.

"Are you alright, *ma petite*?" Remy's voice was calm, and she could hear classical music playing faintly in the background.

"Yes," Mizuko said. The fire alarm ringing from the hall could be clearly heard over the phone.

"What's happened?"

"*I pulled the fire alarm,*" Mizuko explained, "*because of all the bugs in the apartment. They smell bad and they*

*tried to sit on Amber's face. I'm going to burn them with a lighter."*

"I see. May I speak with Amber?"

Mizuko handed the phone to Amber. *"It's Remy."*

Amber gave Mizuko a look but took the phone. "Hi."

"Good evening, Amber. Mizuko says you have bugs?"

"Well, I don't think these things are really bugs," Amber said. "They are small-ish. About the size of your head. They sort of slither around, leaving a trail of slime. Kind of like a mound of... slimy flesh with a mouth that looks like a, um. Well it's nasty. Apparently they can stick some kind of spike or fang from that, uh, orifice that can paralyze or kill. Zuko tried to stomp them and it didn't work. They are tougher than they look."

"Mizuko said something about burning them?"

"Oh, lighting them on fire was Rey's idea. They smell horrible, like sewage or rotting... something. I don't know. But we thought they might be flammable so Rey and I are going to stand by with fire extinguishers while Zuko tries lighting them up.

"I hate to rush this but I the fire department is going to be coming soon and we need to take care of this before that happens."

"I will be there as soon as I can. Please be careful. And don't burn the building down," Remy said, ending the call.

"Sorry, Hamilton," Amber apologized as she gave the phone back to Mizuko. "I know burning the bugs was your idea, but I didn't want to take the time to convince him we really got the idea from you and that you were real."

Mizuko pulled a fire extinguisher off the wall and shoved it into Amber's hands, then led the way toward the kitchen while looking for the brain eaters.

Rey set Hamilton down next to one of the slime trails. "Let's get to work." She breathed shallowly through her mouth, the stench in the apartment almost overpowering. The floor was crisscrossed with lines of the slime, making the floor slippery.

It didn't take long for them to find their quarry. A dozen of them formed a small swarm at the foot of the stairs and as one turned and targeted the three women.

Mizuko pulled out the Zippo and quickly knelt a few feet in front of the swarm. She popped the lighter open and thumbed the lighter. Then, keeping an eye on the bugs, she touched the little flame to the flame trail in front of the bugs.

The slime burst into flames like a trail of gunpowder. In the blink of an eye, the swarm was engulfed in fire. The brainbugs started squealing like tortured pigs, then suddenly they exploded in a shower of burning guts and goo. Mizuko took the brunt of the blast, and almost her entire front was covered with it. And, if it was even possible, the apartment now smelled worse.

Mizuko had toppled over from where she was squatting onto her butt where she sat blinking in surprise. Amber got to work hosing down everything with the fire extinguisher.

"You okay, Mizuko?" Rey stood over her friend, looking her over for signs of injury.

"No. I need a bath," Mizuko said numbly. *"I guess we should look to see if there are more."* She climbed to her feet, resolving that next time, she'd light up the slime trail from further away.

There were a handful in Amber's room and they met Mizuko at the door.

"Miss!" Hamilton chirped. "Some of the bug bits are moving!"

Rey looked at them and he was right; the pieces that were not completely scorched were moving, wriggling, and as she watched, they turned into tiny replicas of their larger selves.

Amber piped up, "Hey maybe we can lead them into the tub upstairs. Blow them up there and let them all burn where it won't torch the whole building?"

Mizuko looked stricken. Blow up her tub? *Her tub??*

"Good idea," Rey said, "but if it's a modern tub it's going to be fiberglass or something like that. We put a fire in there and it's going to go up too."

Amber said, "That might not be the end of the world. It's surrounded by tile and besides, fiberglass doesn't burn, either. If Zuko torches the carpet and lets it burn, we all get cooked, fast."

*"But... my tub..."* Mizuko protested. Then she had an idea. *"I will not allow you to harm or burn my tub, bugs or not. But it's not a terrible idea. Here, I'll go make the tub ready, you two go round them up and get them all to follow you up into my tub. You might have the help the new little ones."*

Rey looked at the approaching monsters. "When I said I enjoyed being chased, this is definitely not what I meant," she muttered to herself. She continued aloud "Get going, Mizuko." She approached the little bugs and looked at them for a moment. "These things are really disgusting." She couldn't help herself and stomped on one. It squished with a sickening pop.

Amber started running around, going through closets, checking under beds and drawing out any of the bugs she could find.

Meanwhile, Mizuko was upstairs running the tub and preparing to do her trick.

It didn't take long to find them all, another twenty of the fleshy female organ-mouthed blobs were dispersed through the apartment. The creatures seemed to move faster when together, so what started as a slow walk leading them toward the stairs soon became almost a run. "I hope you're ready, Miz, because they're coming!"

Mizuko smiled and stopped the water. A small magical effort caused the water to run to the sides of the tub and creep up to the rim. In moments, the water had formed a wall all around the inside of the tub. Mizuko held it there and encouraged the others. *"Hurry and get them to chase you here. I'll pull you out, then Rey can light them up."*

Getting them to chase Rey and Amber wasn't the problem - it was keeping ahead of them that was. Rey was a step ahead of Amber and immediately veered to one side, letting Amber go shooting past her. The girl scrambled up and around the tub, and the wave of brainbugs followed right behind her into the tub.

"Now, Rey!" Mizuko called as she dove after Amber and pressed her to the floor so that Mizuko's own body would protect the teenager from a blast or debris.

Rey stepped into the doorway, did a quick swipe of one hand to try and break the trail of slime, then lit the half that was in the bathroom. As the tiny flame flared, she dove to one side, gathering up Hamilton and curling around him to protect him.

The explosion was deafening and shook the apartment. Every surface was covered by the smoldering guts of the brainbugs.

Mizuko yelped and slapped some burning pieces away from the coat — Amber's — she was wearing. She tried to compartmentalize her concentration to keep water from doing anything but rolling back into the tub and staying there. *"Is everyone okay?"* she called.

"Other than being a bit dirtier than before," Rey called out, "we're fine. But with that explosion, the firefighters are going to be double timing it. We need to get out of here."

*"What about the pieces that are left?"*

"I don't know. Can you use the water to gather them all up and force them down the drain or the toilet?" Even as she said the words, Rey realized that was a bad idea. "No, wait. Can you control the water and all the gunk in it well enough to get it to the balcony? If we shoot it all out into the air, the fall to the ground should kill anything that's left." At least, she hoped, hitting the ground at terminal velocity should do it.

Mizuko commanded the water and it swept up the giblets. With a gesture, she sent it lancing through the glass sliding door, out over the balcony and let it fall eleven stories to the ground. Of course, there was a resulting crash of glass and a chilly breeze swept through the apartment as a result. Mizuko muttered, *"Oops. Ah. Got it, Rey."* She looked at the carnage of her apartment and drooped.

"It can all be fixed," Rey said. "Come on, let's get out of here."

As they headed for the door, she said, "Looks like we got them all."

"I'm afraid not, Miss," Hamilton said from his spot curled up in Rey's arms. "The place on the other side of the gate near here is virtually overrun with them."

Mizuko sighed. *"We're going to need some help. And fire. Lots of fire."*

"You call Less when we get outside," Rey said. "I need to call Alexei."

—

Less than two hours after Claire bid Less good night, there was again a knock at his door. This time, it was the Master of Grief, the investigator and intelligence gatherer for supernatural matters. Septimus Snow was a large changeling, a broadback beast whose shadow resembled that of a black unicorn, while the changeling himself retained a more humanoid form. His eyes were coal black and his face, lined with the hardship he suffered in his duration, was pale as a mime's paint. He still wore the tattered cloak he'd found on some poor casualty of the Thorns. The most startling thing about him was a horn, translucent as an icicle, that protruded from his forehead.

He bowed at the entrance and said but one word. "Constable." Less's position within the Wardens thus named, he was made aware that Septimus was here on official business and that meant he had information of vital importance, for he rarely appeared in person to deliver reports.

*Will this night never end?* Less asked himself as he leaned heavily back into his chair. "Out with it, Septimus. You can see that I am already sitting down and I am prepared to be amazed by your tales of the unexplainable."

Septimus entered and closed the door. "I have been tracking a series of disappearances in the underground. The subway specifically under downtown Mythic City and encountered what may be responsible for some of them. I witnessed something, a man I had thought, assaulting a woman. I was too late to save her as he'd opened a vein in her neck. I believe he was actually... drinking her blood. This does not sit well with me, Constable. I intervened. I broke off a piece of metal railing and I struck this creature until it stopped moving, and then I dragged it back to a safe place I have. I'm not certain if it is living or dead due to my assault. I think it may be a vampire so its apparent death may not be final.

"Now I am uncertain what to do."

Less felt suddenly queasy, like the bottom had dropped out of his stomach. "It is almost certain that this creature is a vampire. I have been told that vampires have been inhabiting the tunnels since they were first dug and that they are extremely dangerous. Where did you take it? The Hedge?"

"No sir. I have a location, a sub-basement beneath an abandoned factory. I found an old rolling table and chained it there, then sealed the doors from the outside. It isn't going anywhere, should it awaken. This location will also be secure enough for questioning."

Less was impressed. "Good work, Septimus!" He paused to consider the risks. He should really bring in Mizuko and her vampire allies but this presented a good intelligence-gathering opportunity for the Bleak Seal. Not only could he get some idea of what he was facing in the subway tunnels, but he could also get a second opinion on Remy. Septimus brought this vampire down once, he could do it again. Less pulled on his socks and stepped into his shoes. Standing, he grabbed his hat, coat and umbrella. "Lead the way, man!"

Septimus bowed, then turned and led them both away.

Along the way to Septimus secured holding area, he explained a little more about the disappearances he was tracking. The seven disappearances were by no means all the people that have disappeared, he told the Winter King, but just those he specifically noticed. Two were runaways, girls who'd taken up sleeping on benches at one of the stations under downtown Mythic. He'd stopped and spoken to them in hopes they might have seen something, but they had been suspicious and reluctant to talk to him. Yet, he was watching when they went down a tunnel with a young man and never returned.

A similar pattern occurred with three transit passengers who followed individuals that were poorly dressed and dirty, as if they were in a trance. Two others were homeless people, contacts of Septimus' who disappeared mysteriously.

Because of this Master Snow was highly motivating to take a personal role in this rather than simply observe, which was his normal charge. He recognized that he went further than perhaps he should have, but he felt he could no longer stand by and allow this to happen if there was something he could do.

—

Septimus had taken Less to the abandoned factory he'd mentioned and was about to open the heavy lock on the chains that bound an angled door that led to the subbasement when his phone rang. The insistent thing joyfully chirped Mizuko's desire to speak with her motley mate.

Less sighed as he read Mizuko's name on the caller ID display. At least she hadn't called *after* he had gone in. He signalled for Septimus to wait and took the call. "Mizuko? How can I help you?"

Mizuko didn't believe in small talk and was terrible at it anyway. She cut straight to the issue. "The Hedge near my apartment is full of slimy bugs that have mouths like vaginas and they eat people's brains. Will you come help me clear them out?"

Less let his head fall back. He looked over at Septimus and the locked door. At the end of the phone was a motley-mate in need. Behind that door lay answers to a mystery. "This sounds like something that Simon would be interested in. Have you tried him?"

"He left for the East Coast. Something about a spinning wheel," Mizuko pointed out. In point of fact, he'd expressed interest in a particular Entitlement called the Gold Spinners. As Less recalled now, he had gone in search of a sponsor for entrance to this rare group. "Rey is here with me already. She asked me to call you. We already got rid of the ones in my apartment but they blew up my tub," Mizuko finished with a heartbroken sob.

"I'm sorry to hear that," he said. The huge links on the chains the the door handles seemed to shiver with anticipation, beckoning him inside. "Look, I'm right in the middle of something. Can I meet you somewhere in a couple of hours?"

"Yes," Mizuko replied. "We will be in the Hedge near my apartment battling brain-eating slug bugs, I imagine. There is a permanent Gate there that is used fairly often by local changelings, at least those who haven't yet had their brains sucked out. I'm sure you will find it. Oh, and avoid the cops and firefighters currently trying to save my apartment building from destruction by coming around the back alley." She paused. "Wait. Do you know where I live? I moved a few weeks ago."

Less had always made sure he was familiar with the Trods commonly (and uncommonly) used in the Hedge. He had made special inquiries when Mizuko had moved to Sante Fe. "Are you talking about the Hargrave Gate? Next to a development of high-end apartments? I know the one, but best you give me your address to avoid any mix-up."

Mizuko gave him the address and it was just the one he was thinking of. She obviously didn't know it had a name, but a relatively regularly used gate like this often picked up a name for changelings to refer to it more easily.

Less pocketed his phone. "All right, Septimus, let's see this vampire you've caught. I don't think they can see through the Mask but reinforce yours just to be safe. Don't say anything when we go in, don't let him goad you. And be careful, we have no idea the situation behind those doors."

Septimus nodded, then finished unlocking and unchaining the doors. He led the way down stairs and then paused just inside the doorway to pick up a hooded lamp. With a flick, he lit a match and then he lamp's wick. He held it up high to push back the thick darkness of the sub-basement. Then guided Less to a body strapped to the top of a heavy metal cart.

Septimus paused and murmured, "Interesting. The corpse looks fresh now, and in perfect shape. When I left, part of his skull had been shattered where I had hit him, and his legs broken. That appears no longer to be the case." The two changelings watched carefully, but the body didn't react to the light or their presence.

The big broadback frowned toward Less. "Perhaps it cannot awaken without that upon which it feeds."

Less shook his head. He didn't believe it. If the vampire had healed its wounds there wasn't much reason for it to remain asleep. He suspected it was just hoping to be released in order to be disposed of. He moved closer to check that the straps were still secure. To check for signs of life - or unlife - he probed the man's emotions, reasoning that he might be feeling regret as his capture or missing his subterranean companions.

Less sensed there was kind of sorry within the corpse. He wished he'd brought a friend along in that last hunt, and now he supposes he will perish for the mistake. More importantly to Less was that the presence of some kind of sorrow indicated the presence of life.

The emotion was very weak and seemed to come and go and by that sign, Less could guess that the creature was not conscious. He did not know if it could wake on its own or not.

"You may be right," Less whispered. "He definitely seems to be unconscious." Not having Mizuko's intimate contact with vampires, he was very curious as to how well they mimicked life. He hesitatingly reached out and touched the man's face, then checked for pulse and breath. He even went so far as to place his ear on the man's chest to listen for heartbeat. There was nothing.

"So, I guess we need to wake him up to get any useful information," said Less. He relaxed on the effort to speak in a whisper, and though he spoke quietly the sound of his own voice in the cavernous and tomblike location surprised him. He was loathe to feed a vampire his own blood, and was doubly wary to give him changeling blood on top of that. "I don't suppose you happen to have a bag of mortal O negative, eh Septimus?"

"I do not, Constable," Septimus agreed. "Given his treatment of his would-be mortal donor, I daresay he does not deserve so fine a... vintage. Allow me to procure a substitute more suitable to his station."

He stood utterly still, listening and as he did, Less quickly detected what he was listening for. The sound of rats scurrying, digging and eating quietly filled the empty space of the abandoned factory. "Ah. There is something at hand."

With some effort and a great deal of patience, Septimus "procured" three small-sized blood donors. In an hour, he had three of the rascals in a burlap bag.

"Would you care to do the honors, sire?" Septimus offered Less the squirming sack.

"Who's the Beast here?" asked Less, but he reached a gloved hand into the bag to snatch a rodent. He hoped it would only take one of the critters to revive the vampire. *Sorry, little guy, but you are called to a higher purpose*, he thought as he held it over the man's face and sliced its neck with his sword.

Less had to drain two of the rodents before there was a visible reaction from the corpse. The vampire began drinking the little stream of blood, his tongue search for trace drips while he swallowed, coughed. Pale grey eyes opened and fixed upon the dying rat. He gagged then twisted he face away.

"Augh!" he spat. "What the hell, man?" He jerked, trying to sit up but managed only to make the table he was chained to jump. "Shit. All right, all right, I'm alive you got me. Just get that thing out of my face."

"Ah," Septimus remarked. "It speaks."

Less dropped the dead rat onto the man's chest. "Who are you?" he asked evenly.

"Frank. Name's Frank. Let me up!"

Less ignored him. "What are you?"

"What do you think!" Frank yelled. "You're the one dripping rat blood down my throat. I'm pissed, that's what."

Septimus found a length of pipe somewhere and suggestioned, "Perhaps loosening his teeth will also loosen his tongue, Constable?"

"Wait! Wait. I need teeth man! Don't," Frank pled. "Look man, I'm nobody. What do you want from me?"

"Answers. Yes or no. You are a vampire?"

Frank looked between them, and forced a laugh. "That would be crazy!"

Septimus whacked a knee cap. The crunch immediately elicited a scream of pain from Frank. "You have no pulse. You do not breath except to keep lying to us. It turns out that you can take a lot of damage that would kill a mortal. I bet we could remove quite a lot of you before you would actually expire, especially with a ready supply of rats. For example, I see that you don't really need your feet now."

"Wait!" Frank screamed. "Wait wait! Okay yeah, I'm a vampire! What do you people *want* from me!"

"You will answer every question the Constable has for you. Then we will discuss your fate. The better your answers, the more favorable the Constable will be toward allowing you a less unpleasant fate than I might choose for you."

Less was a touch annoyed that Septimus had let slip the term 'mortal', implying that they were not. Still, he was getting results and Less couldn't argue with that. "You are a member of a band of vampires who have been inhabiting the train tunnels of Mythic City since they were first built. Tell me about your band. How many of you live in the tunnels, who leads you, and why have the disappearances of people from train and subway stations increased recently?"

"How do you..." Frank shook his head. "I don't know much. I'm just a new guy. We all follow the Baron of Shadows. Most of his people aren't pretty like me, so they like the underground places. I like it because it's safer for me. These 'people' as you call them aren't what they seem. They are servants, bound slaves of other vampires who didn't have the decency to ask permission before they stepped on his domain. Rivals, I guess. The Baron is a big boss among our kind in this city, but not the ruler. The ruler is weak bastard called the Don. He's not keeping his underlings in their place so they are pushing the Baron's territory.

"Look, we don't want attention. The people we've been making disappear aren't innocent humans. They are pawns in a bigger game. Way bigger than me. You really wanna get involved with this? The baron has a lot of people and I might be new, but we still look after our own. They'll come lookin' for me sooner or later."

"So, the woman you killed was a slave to your ruler - the Don? Your Baron has you kill slaves bound to your own ruler if they so much as use public transportation? It doesn't add up! Explain."

"Naw, not the Don's own slaves," Frank said. "Other rivals. People who are supposed to be under the Don's rule, but think they can ignore that. It's a little more complex than just trespassing. The Baron is sending a message specifically to the vampires who have been poking into our business by targeting their servants. We don't kill our own. That would be civil war. But the vampire big shots don't mind hitting rivals big shots where it hurts — their resources. In this case, the Baron finds it simplest to hit their servants.

"The Baron is the recognized master of the tunnels and subways under central Mythic City and I doubt the Don wants to pick a war with us right now. It would leave him open to the other jackals waiting to feast on his corpse."

"What is the business that your rivals are so interested in? Are you friend or foe to a vampire named Remy and his companion Carter?"

"Feeding grounds. Tons of people come through the subway. They want a piece of that. The Baron's got most of the Transit Police under his control, see? Makes hunting easy. Guy named Remy?" Frank paused. "No. I'm small fish, but I ain't heard of this Remy. But Carter, I dunno. Maybe. Tall woman, smokes cigars, right?"



Less paused. momentarily put off-guard. "Yes, that's her. Tell me about her."

"Uh, I met her just once. I wasn't hunting or nothin', but hanging out at little coffee shop wastin' time. In comes this tall red head and some guy. She's smoking a cigar, and I think, well that's new. Anyway, you can't smoke in the subways. I wasn't gonna say anything, but the help says she's got to put out the cigar, right? She does. On the back of his hand. Tells him her name is Carter Cartwright and she's come to clean house. Then things get crazy. This guy starts screaming about house this or that. He sprouts friggin' *wings* out of his friggin' *back*! Horns too. Like a demon or somethin'. Anyway, this Carter and her boyfriend, whoever it was, have come kind of power too. Before you know it, the Do-Biz Demon is hanging three feet in the air and he just starts burning. I run like hell. I don't like fire much. That's the last I saw."

Less raised his eyebrows and turned to meet Septimus' gaze. He took the dead rat on Frank's chest by the tail and casually flung it off to the side. "One less Do-Biz is always a good thing," he said walking around the vampire and beyond where he could turn his head to follow. "You seem to have been very forthright with us, Frank. I don't deny your kind the right to exist but in order to justify your own personal existence I'm going to need some assurances that what you are telling me is true. How can I distinguish a vampire slave from a regular human so I can check your story?"

"Ah. Well there are different kinds of vampire servant. Most are just dupes, people working for vampires but don't know it, or people who've deceived themselves into thinking vampires are cool and romantic, or they think they are in love. Whatever. Then there is the blood slave. You can tell these because they are really devoted to their master. They'd do anything for their masters. Anything. And in return their masters let them drink a little of their blood. They might be enslaved to their master, but they are happy about it. They get powers, immortality without having problems with, ah, daylight. These are ones that are valuable. They represent an investment of the vampire's time and resources. So, they are targets for reprisal when vampires have disputes. They are also extra muscle and in groups, pretty dangerous in their own right. How do you pick them out of a crowd? Well, you need to know your prey, don't you? Learn to see the signs. I can't tell you how. There's no telltale signs at a glance. You have to learn it. Look for the obsessions they have. Watch them. Then you'll know."

Less had a goldmine of information in Frank and didn't want to lose that. But keeping him risked his Shadow brothers and sisters coming to look for him. He checked his watch - Mizuko and Rey were expecting him. "You're a good kid, Frank, but I suppose you're expected back before curfew. I'm always in the market for information and ... I can get things. If you're looking to trade, paint 'Carter was here' at a train or subway station and I will meet you two nights after, one hour before sunrise." He moved over to Septimus and whispered, "Put a bag on his head and dump him back where you found him. Don't break him too badly. Well, not unless he won't fit in your trunk."

"As you wish, Constable," Septimus said. He dumped the remaining live rat out of the bag. It scurried away.

As he prepared to put it on Frank, the vampire made a face. "Aw man. Hey wait! Who are you people? What was with all the que-"

Septimus showed Frank the pipe.

"Ah, nevermind. Ready for the bad, any time!"

Then Septimus took care of the cleanup, while Less attended to motley matters.

—

Rover's work had progressed at a remarkable pace, at least on renovating and rebuilding cars. Peaches was, well, a peach. Very helpful, enthusiastic, and knowledgeable, she suggested many ideas that were both

interesting and workable. And beyond that, she was able to produce several good ideas about how to transform the Goblin Staff into something useful instead of harmful. Over the past several months, the two wizened little changelings put their industrious natures to work and they came up with a solution. While the Staff hadn't been present formally yet to anyone, testing had continued quite successfully.

Aside from that, Rover also got an interesting personal call at his shop. It seemed Belle was interested now in leaving her home city of Las Vegas and coming to Mythic City to stay. She was hoping he might be able to help her locate some place to call home. Rover knew that such moves were a huge and difficult adjustment for a changeling to make, but whatever her reason was, she hadn't volunteered it. Then again, if he recalled some of the conversation they had when they spoke back in the beginning of fall, perhaps the reasons weren't so hard to figure out.

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Mizuko put her phone away and told Rey, "Less is coming. Maybe in a couple hours. I am not certain when, but he will be here eventually."

Rey shook her head. "We can't wait that long. Amber, can you find a place to hang out?"

Amber nodded and asked, "Yep. Hey, do you have any spare cash? I could go get some clothes for Zuko and me. We left everything in the apartment but these rather... messy coats and your blankets."

"I do, but there's also a backpack in the trunk of my car with a couple spare sets of clothes," Rey replied. It wasn't the first time she was glad she'd kept spare changes of clothing at places she usually spent time at. A habit she picked up from living with the pack.

"Okay. I could wait in your car," Amber offered. "Is it open?"

Rey pulled the keys out of her pocket. "It is now," she said, clicking on the remote open button. "And so is the trunk. If you're going to get inside with that dirty stuff on, put a clean blanket down first please. I just got the bloodstains out. There's trash bags in the trunk too, so you can put the dirty clothes in them."

"Thanks! I will." Amber scurried off.

When Rey turned back to Mizuko, she signed, "I guess it is down to you and I then. The Gate is this way."

"And Hamilton." Rey gave the cat a quick friendly scritch before following the nymph.

The apartment building had a small courtyard around back, with a tiny garden and some benches, as well as the rear entrance to the building. Surrounding the courtyard was a 5-foot brick wall with an arched gateway, and the Gate into the Hedge was in the gateway.

Mizuko reached out and touched the Gate, choosing to use magic to open it rather than a Key. A translucent image of a dark, shadowy Hedge beyond came slowly into view, and they walked through. From here, the Hedge seemed more real and the mortal realm more like a hazy dream.

The path beyond the gate was thickly covered with slime and the smell was strong enough to make both women gag.

"We will be careful, Miss, correct?" Hamilton asked as he wrinkled his tiny little nose. "These brainbugs were

everywhere around the gate."

"Of course we will," Rey replied. "Why are they called brainbugs? I get the brain part, but they're not bugs. They're more like slugs."

"I called them that, Miss, because they look a lot like the brain bugs from Starship Troopers. Don't they?" He looked up at her.

"That they do, Hamilton." Rey scratched him under his chin.

Mizuko frowned, wondering what in the heck Starship Troopers were. She was reasonably certain they weren't from any branch of the military she'd heard of. She didn't ask, though, and simply clutched the blanket close as she looked around for signs of the icky slug-things.

"I saw some more of them further down the path," Hamilton offered. "And one of their victims is further down."

"With all this slime," Rey said as she carefully picked her way down the path, leaving the gate behind, "it's going to be difficult to set them on fire without getting ourselves torched in the process. And I don't think burning down this area of the Hedge is a good idea. Alexei told me there may be several Hollows nearby."

*"It has to be a controlled burn, then," Mizuko said. "I have been thinking about that. Can you give me a little time? I will accept a new contract, one that will allow me to master fire as well as I do water."*

Rey nodded and moved back a bit to give her some room.

Mizuko placed Rey's blanket upon the bed of needles that served to mark the path here and took time to find a comfortable position. Dressed only in Amber's now ruined leather coat meant it wasn't very easy to find a lady-like position that was also comfortable, but she didn't really care about that here. She still had the Zippo and took it out now. She lit it with a flick and stared into the yellow flame.

She murmured so quietly, Rey had to strain to hear her words. *"O Fire, eternal element of change, purification and destruction, hear my request. Honor, ancient Flame, the Contracts of old as have all the elements. Bequeath unto me your blessings and in return I grant you a part of my destiny and my being."* There was a rush of magic, the impression of heat, and then just as quickly as it had come, it was gone. Mizuko opened her eyes and looked at Rey.

What Mizuko had done so selflessly and at the cost to her own unborn potential, was to accept a known contract, that of the Element of Fire. She seemed to do so casually and simply, but in fact it was neither. To her, it was something that had to be done. Yet it would forever be a part of her now, as much as Water was. Nearly as much as Ice was. From this point forth, she'd irrevocably changed a part of herself that would never be quite the same again.

"I hope your sacrifice won't be in vain," Rey said softly to her friend. "Did you want that blanket back?" The side that had been against Mizuko's skin was patchy with the slime that had covered her. The other now had dead needles all over it.

Mizuko picked it up and shook it and then looked at it critically. She shook her head and folded it.

"Let's keep it handy, then. We might need it later." Rey looked around at the dying hedge plants around her and frowned. This is not a good sign, she thought, and wished she'd brought her gun, but it was locked away in the gun safe at home.

The trio continued further down the path, following the wake of the devastation left behind by the brainbugs.

Before long, they came across the corpse Hamilton had found earlier. "No offense meant," Rey murmured, "but I hope that wasn't anyone we knew."

"No," Mizuko supposed. *"It was someone just I and some other Santa Fe changelings knew. He didn't deserve this."* She stared at the corpse for a while, remembering the few times she'd seen him visit Corazon's. *"Alexei knew him."*

"I'll let Alexei know when we get back," Rey said. "Hopefully he'll be the only casualty."

As they trudged on, Mizuko looked worried. The concept of setting herself on fire with a thought (don't think it, don't think it!) was there. She knew it was her ally now, not an enemy, but it was just such an alien concept. She wasn't remotely as sure of herself as she was with water and ice in her thoughts. What if fire grew too hard to control? It tended to spread, unlike water and ice, and that meant it might grow beyond her ability to control very quickly. What if she lost control and Rey died as a result?

"Mizuko, stop." Rey put a hand on her friend's shoulder and listened harder. She thought she'd heard something slithering around. And there it was again. She set Hamilton down and pointed ahead and to the right. "Over there," she said softly.

After she dropped the blanket to the ground, the nymph let slip the spell that released her newfound power. Blue-white flames appeared around her right hand first, then swept over her body in a silent rush. Afraid at first, she stared at her hands, appearing to burn but remaining somehow unharmed. *"It feels... cold,"* she murmured. But she concentrated, forcing the flames to bend to her will and managed to reduce the flames everywhere but from her hands to her elbows. She looked at Rey and nodded, signaling her readiness.

"Stay back, Hamilton," Rey said and crept forward. Before she'd gone three steps, a brainbug the size of a rotweiler came lurching out of the brambles and onto the path. "Shoot!" Rey exclaimed, and shot to the other side of the path to give Mizuko a clear shot.

Mizuko brought her hands up to form a ball of fire between them, then made it streak like a meteor toward the hulking brain-beast. The fireball hit it dead center and set the thing on fire. It squealed loudly as it sizzled.

Rey waited a moment before saying "It's not going to--" The rest of her words were interrupted by the brainbug exploding, showering the area with flaming gore that - at least for the moment - did look like it was going to set anything else ablaze.

Mizuko made a face as the smell hit her, then went about locating, controlling and then snuffing out the bits once she was sure it wouldn't develop into a mini-brain.

"What do you think, Hamilton? Will that work?" Rey looked at the little cat.

"Undoubtedly," Hamilton had to agree. "I guess she's a little more useful than she looks, after all, but you needn't tell her I said that."

"What happened between the two of you before I got here?" Rey asked, a little bewildered. "I've never seen you act this way with anyone before."

"An unforgivable offense, Miss," he answered primly. "She mistook me for a rat after I saved her life."

Rey groaned. There was no way she was going to get in the middle of the situation, she thought. They'll just have to work it out on their own. She looked over to see how Mizuko was doing.

Mizuko was finishing up putting out the fires by lifting drawing the flames up into the air where they choked

out soon enough without access to more fuel. When she was done, she looked back at Rey and smiled. With her hands and forearms still on fire, her signing was rather dazzling to look at. She transmitted, "I feel like a superhero. Ready to move on?"

Rey nodded. "Let's go."

The scene repeated itself half a dozen more times, the brainbugs all as large as the first one they'd encountered, some alone, some apparently hunting in packs of four or more, and they discovered more and more bodies. Most were of hedgebeasts, but there were two other Changelings, neither of whom Mizuko recognized.

"This is not good," Mizuko signed. "Where are they all coming from?"

"I don't know where they're coming from," Rey said aloud for Haimlton's benefit, Either something's churning them out or they've been here for a lot longer than anyone may have realized and their population has gotten to the point where they're swarming. Whatever the source, we have to find it and stop it."

Mizuko nodded, set her eyes to the ground and began tracking remaining slime trails in hopes one of them might lead back to the source. After a few missteps and doubling backs, she found the right trail. It took them deeper into the Hedge, away from the well traveled paths and onto almost overgrown tracks. They knew, however, they were going the right way when they started seeing the bodies. Hedge beasts of every kind, from tiny sprights to a huge beast with a hard silver shell. To their dismay, they found two other Changelings, neither of how Mizuko had seen before.

Mizuko realized that the dead fae could as easily been her as it had any of these others. Caught unprepared, the little monsters could easily overwhelm any fae, it seemed. At least now they knew their weakness. It was up to them to find the source of the horrid things and destroy it.

It was difficult to continue to follow the trail, not because it was difficult to see, but because of the stench. A few times Mizuko and Rey had to run to evade scavengers who thought they might like to have fresh meat instead. Eventually, they could see a clearing ahead, and from it came a host of unsettling sounds.

"Let's see if we can sneak up and get a look so we know what we're dealing with," Rey signed to Mizuko.

Mizuko nodded and dropped into a stealthy crouch before proceeding. Rey followed close behind, and they both came to a stop just outside the clearing. In the center of it was a giant brainbug, maybe twenty feet tall, surrounded by hundreds, perhaps thousands of tiny replicas of itself. Behind and on top of it was a giant praying mantis-like creature with a brilliant blood red carapace.

Rey pulled her cell phone out of her pocket and took a couple of pictures, thankful she'd turned off the camera sound effects. She then touched Mizuko's arm to get her attention and signed "What did less say he was doing that was more important than this?"



Mizuko signed, "He didn't. Even after I told him my tub was broken." Mizuko was a little hung up on that.

"Hey, Rey? What's that thing on top of the mammoth brain bug?" she signed.

"I'm not sure," Rey signed in return. "It looks a bit like a--" She suddenly whipped her head to the right and yelled "Shit!". One of the mantis-things reared up behind the two women and was about to slice into them with its long bladed forelegs when there was a flash of blue and silver. One of the legs went flying and the beast roared and scrambled to one side. Behind it stood a changeling with shimmering silver skin and hair the shade of the Caribbean ocean on a calm summer day, dressed in a battered old leather duster over jeans and a white t-shirt. In his hand was a long, glowing, katana-like blade that was now decorated in the monster's blood.

In the clearing arose another roar, as all the bugs now knew of their presence.

It had all happened faster than Mizuko could react and she stared at the newcomer for a moment. "Um. Okay, you guys kill the mantis bugs and I'll kill everything else." Fire erupted all over her body, likely drawing a lot of attention but giving her the fire she needed to attack. Despite the urgency of the situation, however, Mizuko's eyes lingered on the surprising and quite beautiful man.

"No, don't! We don't need a Hedge-Chernoby! and us in the middle of it." Rey scrambled away from Mizuko, putting space between them and making it harder to attack both of them at once. She drew fast on her Glamour reserve, hoping she'd have enough time to shift form before they were overrun.

Mizuko shrugged. She was pretty sure *she* wouldn't get hurt by a Hedge-Chernoby! Then it occurred to her that Hamilton and the other two changelings wouldn't be so lucky. So, instead of taking her fire and making fireballs hot enough to burn both flesh and bone alike, she caused it to leap to the ground in a line — and hoped she could use it to keep the brain bugs back as well as keep it under control. If they charged it, though, she knew there'd be some mighty big explosions.

A flicker of a smile crossed the unknown Changeling's face before he lashed out at the mantis-creature again as it tried to skewer him. He hit one of its hind legs and it reared up, both to get away from the swordsman and away from the fire.

The moment she had the power, she shifted into her "wolf" form and started to circle the mantis-creature, hoping to find a weak spot.

Mizuko, her line complete and with blue-white flames enveloping her again, fearlessly pressed their advantage, hurtling with exquisite precision directly through the mantis' remaining limbs and then clear again. She smiled as the thing realized that she had touched it with a burning, white-hot finger that scored a smoldering burn across its underside and thrashed in pain. She withdrew a little in order to keep an eye on her wall of fire, which brought her near the changeling with the silvery skin. She stole another look at him now that she was closer.

He was as handsome as she was beautiful and moved with an efficient lethal grace. His eyes were reflective like mirrors, and he winked at her before attacking the mantis-thing again. His blade slid up and in on the creature, catching it where her line of fire had scored it.

The moment his blade danced away, Rey was there, her jaws crunching deep into the monster's weakened armor while it waved its legs around ineffectively. She pulled away, and a large piece of its carapace came off in her mouth.

Mizuko turned her smile at him, then checked on her line of fire. A score of the smaller brainbugs were almost at the flames, being shoved forward by those behind, and the whole were rapidly gaining speed.

Mizuko raised her voice, *"They are about to swarm my line of fire. They might blow themselves up, even if I don't manage set of an explosive chain reaction. You two need to get out of here!"* She took that moment to call upon her Cloak of Fire clause, which she hoped would at least protect her from being burned even if the explosion still broke her bones and mashed her into the ground. A feeling of bone-deep exhaustion began to settle in upon her. The fire magic she'd been casting about had rapidly taken a toll on her and she knew she had barely enough magic left for the weakest of glammers. She hoped she wouldn't need any more.

The silver-eyed changeling thrust at the mantis-creature, his blade darting in and out before it sank deep into its body up to the hilt. The monster roared and reared up again, its lone bladed forearm lashing out. It made contact with Silver Eyes and sent him flying.

Rey bunched her muscles, crouched, and leaped at the thing, slamming it down to the ground with a loud crack as she bit into the soft tissue she'd exposed before. Dark green and blue ichor spurted out and the mantis-thing thrashed about for a few moments before falling still.

Mizuko looked away, trying to find where the man with the silvery irises had fallen. She knew that with the coming rush, there could be a massive explosion, and it would happen in second. **"Run!"** she screamed. She caught up to her two companions and began to flee as well.

Hamilton was already sprinting down the path back the way they came, with Silver Eyes close behind. Rey kept pace with Mizuko, not wanting to outdistance the others and leave them all behind. A few seconds after they started running the explosions started, culminating in a huge blast that rocked the Hedge for miles around.

Less rushed from the warehouse district to where he could catch the inter-urban bus to Sante Fe. He didn't know what he could expect once he got to Mizuko's apartment. She had mentioned bugs infesting her apartment from a gate in the Hedge. Had they overrun the building? The block?

When he finally did turn the corner at an exhausted fast walk, he was brought up by the pair of fire engines and trio of police cars that lined the street. The street was cordoned off preventing anyone from getting close. Nothing was burning and none of the trucks had their hoses assembled but the fire-fighters hurried in and out of the lobby doors in full attire. The occupants of the building stood in annoyed, rag-tag groups. Most were on their phones, some comforted their pets. Less scanned the faces for Mizuko but decided if she were

there she would be at the centre of the largest crowd of by-standers and invisible from view. Near one of the police cars Less saw Remy Deprez talking to an officer. He very much wanted to pose the vampire some veiled questions now that Frank had revealed interesting facts about their organization, but didn't want to get embroiled in the investigation.

He decided instead to head directly to Hargrave Gate, which was within an archway on the grounds of the building. Winter's mantle prevented anyone from taking any notice of him as he picked his way through the people and equipment into the relative quiet of the garden. With a touch of magic the door to the Faerie world opened to him.

Less slipped through the gate and found himself surrounded by foul smelling slime that seemed to creep up and over onto his shoes. He was barely able to register annoyance at it when he heard a great explosion, and found himself on the ground when the hedge around him shook from the blast. He leaped to his feet and called upon Air to protect him. His body seemed to fade in and out of mist and fog as he flew down the desecrated Trod towards the disturbance.

It took a while, but eventually Less' nose - following the foul stench of rotting corpses and burnt things that should best have been left in the sewer - led him to a narrow, slime covered trail leading off into a particularly dense thicket of thorned bushes. The area was littered with tiny globs of smouldering flesh that, thankfully, weren't yet setting the dead and dry bushes aflame.

Somewhere ahead down the side trail, he heard a rustle of vegetation. He wanted to call out for his motley-mates but long experience had taught him the value of not drawing attention to himself in the Hedge. He drew his blade and proceeded warily. A few yards down the trail, a tiny grey cat suddenly appeared from around the bend ahead.

"What happened here?" he demanded of the Hedge creature. He suspected it was far more than mere cat.

"Well sir — oh my. Do you realize you have some sort of icy thing floating above your head? Yes of course. And explanation," Hamilton breezed on. "Well you see, there are these bug things that have been killing everything around here, including a number of changelings. They escaped into the mortal realm over there and attacked more folks, as well, being surprisingly resilient." The little feline seemed to be terribly windy and slow to get to the point. But at least he spoke quickly. "However, I found a naked ice nymph, which was a stroke of luck, who summoned up an old friend of mine. We took care of them in the mortal realm, tracked them back here and avoided becoming either a meal or lumpy salsa after the crazy nymph blew them all to bits. Ah yes, and some changeling with a sword helped. I don't know who that one was. But the other two are just behind--"

"Ah Miss!" the cat spoke as Rey came into view, accompanied by aforementioned nymph — who was actually on fire rather than encased in ice.

"You can put the sword away. You missed all the fun," Rey said with a wry smile. "Less, this is my friend Hamilton. Hamilton, this is Less Seleman, the Desert Duchy's King of the Winter Court."

"Nice to meet you, Hamilton," said Less as he slid his sword back into the umbrella sheath. "Everything sorted, Rey? A Hedge incursion into the mortal world is a serious thing!"

"Not serious enough to get you to join us right away, I guess." Rey's expression was calm, as if they were discussing the weather. "I estimate there were about two to three hundred of the small ones, plus a breeding female and two males. We believe we eliminated them all. I'm going to contact the Magister of Nightmares and someone in the Summer Court to let them know what's happened, give them descriptions of the things and what Mizuko and I know about them."

Less had spent longer waiting for the bus than he had with the vampire. "My regular beat doesn't include



Sante Fe," was all he said on the subject of his lateness. "What do you know of them? Do you think a new Keeper is in town?"

Rey took a slow breath in an attempt to control her temper. "They hunt by swarm and the more of them there are the faster they move, and eat brains. Cold appears to harden the slime that covers them. They are vulnerable to fire, and if they take enough damage from it, they explode. Any bits that are not burnt enough turn into more of the little things. And they seem to survive quite well outside the Hedge." She was in no mood to play twenty questions. "Now if you excuse us, Mizuko and I need to go check on Amber, and then get cleaned up." her eyes narrowed. "That reminds me. Why didn't the little envelope addressed to Veridia I tucked inside my report about Fidelius make it to her? She told me she never received it."

Mizuko looked between Rey and Less. She signed Less a quiet greeting and smiled. She was dressed in only a filthy, now mostly destroyed leather coat. Aside from the mess of slime and dirt, it was also holed thanks to running through the Thorns and had blasted to tatters along one side. A sleeve fell off, caught on fire from her flames and flared into bright flame for a moment as the highly combustible slime met her fire without her protection. It was ash before it reached the ground. "Look!" She signed excitedly. "I can do fire now! But I'm a little cold. I'd like to go home."

"I sent the files you prepared to all the court regents," said Less. The events before Rey's abduction had faded to distant memory with all the recent demands on his time. "She has been mourning her dead sister. Maybe it was misplaced and she forgot about it." He let the women go about their business. "I'll strike a team of changeling fire elementals to patrol the local Hedge gates and pass out the information about these brainbugs," he said as they wandered off.

"You might want to check your security, Less. If someone took the note...." Rey left the rest unsaid.

"Will do. You never know."

Rey headed toward the Hedge Gate and Mizuko started to follow, then stopped and looked at Less curiously. She awkwardly patted his hand and then gave him a hug, before retreating and hurrying after Rey.

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### *Brain Eater Wrapup*

After exiting the Hedge, Rey and Mizuko found their way to the car after some creative logistics for Mizuko to avoid being seen by the authorities. Since they couldn't stay in their apartment tonight, Rey offered for them to crash at her place. Amber still had a blanket and so Mizuko won the right to wear Rey's spare set of clothes in the trunk. Amber didn't need to leave the car anyway.

Mizuko asked Rey to give her a little time to try to explain to Remy what happened, then went in search of her undead beau. She couldn't seem him outside, and she had no real desire to go inside looking for him. The nymph remembered the cell phone in her coat pocket. It looked rather worse for wear - a small crack in the case and scorch marks around the edges, but it worked. She dialed Remy's number, but it went straight to voice mail.

She left the message, "Hello Remy. There was an attack at the apartment. They would have killed everything alive in the building so I pulled the fire alarm to get them to leave safely. There was fighting and my tub was broken. Amber survived and I am not hurt. I'm very sorry I blew up the tub. I put Amber somewhere safe, and Rey and I hunted them down. They had already killed several of my people so we had to fight them, but there were hundreds of them, some the size of elephants. So I blew them up. I think I got them all. I'm sorry about the tub."

Just after 5 am, Mizuko's cell phone rang. The display wasn't working properly, so Mizuko couldn't see who

was calling. She'd camped in her old room at Rey's. She'd showered hours ago and decided to get some rest, so it took her a moment to focus and brush at her eyes to wake up, then open the phone.

"Hello?"

"Good morning." Remy's voice was accompanied by very faint static.

"Is that you Remy?"

"Yes, it is."

"There is static on this phone. Did you get my message?"

"Yes, I got your message, Mizuko. That's why I'm calling now, rather than waiting for a more civilized hour."

"Okay. I'm not sure what the authorities think. After calling up all that fire in the Otherworld, I wanted to deal with it after I rested. I hope it didn't cause problems for you, but I needed to act or else there would be a very large issue when those things overran the area."

"I've taken care of it."

Mizuko paused. "That must have been difficult. I would like to make up for what you must have had to go through. Is there anything I can do?"

"Tonight, no. This happened at a rather inopportune time." Remy paused. "I will need some time to figure out what, if anything, you can do."

"Okay. Aside from personal favors and granting wishes, I have mastery over ice, water and fire, power over the withering nature of Autumn, fear and omens; I am a sorceress able to identify supernatural beings, speak with ghosts, and I can identify the mystical properties of any artifact. Also, there are ways I know I can enter dreams. Not my specialty, though." She was well aware that he'd known little of her actual capabilities.

"Annabeth says it is beneath me to say I would do so much for you and then languish in my apartment hoping you would call upon me. I am fixing this because clearly not only is it pathetic, but powerful and deadly things will be attracted to me where ever I am. It is better that I involve myself more with the world, or apparently the world is going to involve itself with me."

"It is like that for everyone, *ma petite*," Remy replied. "I must go. I'll speak with you soon."

"Okay." Mizuko closed the phone and went back to sleep.

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Later that morning, during his coffee break at the train station, Less returned to his office. He removed his shoes and rubbed his bleary eyes. He'd only gotten a couple of hours sleep the night before and the tedium of the day was getting to him. He leaned back in his chair and thought about what Rey had said. A possible breach in security. He had sent out the Fidelius folders as the Winter King but many of his court officers were also members of the Bleak Seal. It was hard to know where the leak could be, if there was one. Why didn't Rey just give her little note to Veridia herself when she attended her own court? A good spy wouldn't have taken the note either, just looked at the contents. Chances were that it had just been lost, but he wasn't still around because he relied on chance. There was nothing for it. It was time for the time-honoured staple of espionage - planted mis-information.

He uncovered his old typewriter and slid it into the working position. There was always official business to be communicated between the Kings and Queens of the Duchy, mostly to Spring to keep them abreast of

what they would be facing come their turn at the wheel. Winding in a thick roll of carbon paper (He had a Hobbit-hole full of the stuff, surplus from WWII.) and heavily tapped out his report. He tried to think of what false information he could get away with. He decided to replicate the original leak. After finishing the short report, he wrote out a short note for Veridia.

"Queen Veridia, I will be unable to meet with you at our regular time. If it pleases you, meet me at the Winter Court community centre on Thursday at midnight. I have some interesting news to impart!"

He folded it and tucked it into a plain envelope, on which he wrote "Ashen Queen" and tucked it into the package for the Autumn Court. He would ask Mizuko later today to inform Veridia of the intended deception, and to invite the queen to meet him, regardless, to see if any uninvited guests showed up.

This meeting went as expected and there were no unwelcome hangers-on detected — this time.