

Richard stood in front of a mirror straightening his bow tie. He had never been to a Twelfth Night event before and he wasn't certain what to expect. He did know that it was a special occasion that included dinner, so he had put on his best suit. It even had tails and shiny shoes that... sort of were attached to his feet. Well enough mortals would just think he had big ankles, anyway. He checked his breath, and then, with an effort of will, reinforced his Mask so he could see what he looked like to humans. It was, after all, a human event. He needed to blend.

He'd only just gotten a glimpse at his mortal mask — deep brown eyes, hair cut cropped close to his scalp and a strong jaw were his strongest facial features. The suit was tailored for a huge man, yet it still strained somewhat to contain the massive changeling. It would have to do.

He turned away as the doorbell rang, and went to answer the door.

A strikingly beautiful woman stood on the other side, wearing a long, elegant coat of deep chocolate brown that brought out the sparkling highlights in her strawberry blonde hair. It was piled almost artlessly on top of her head, with tendrils cascading down past her shoulders in gentle curls. Her hazel eyes quickly took him in, and the split second before she spoke, he caught the scent of flowers he associated with only one person. "Richard?" Rey's sultry Louisiana accent flowed from her, caressing his ears.

He looked at her, drinking in the welcome vision. He was used to seeing Rey's fae side, and he loved the way she looked. The mortal mask was a change, yet it was a pleasant change, bringing a newness to the evening. He bowed and then took her hand. He held it close enough she could feel his breath, then he said, "You look divine tonight, Rey." He released her hand and straightened.

Rey's full lips curved into a smile and she thought yet again how much she wanted him, both physically and emotionally. It didn't matter what he looked like. This was Richard. Not hers, not yet. But hopefully soon. She knew the knowledge of it lit up her face and she met his eyes without hesitation. "If the other women there tonight do not envy me," she said, her voice low and husky, "then they are fools." Before she even realized it, her right hand was reaching out to him, wanting to touch him.

He gave her his arm, then glanced back at his small, ground-floor apartment. It was one of four apartments that took up all the space of this large, old house. He closed the heavy wood door and locked up, then put his hand over the hand she hand on his arm. They started down the walk and he paused, looking at the huge hum-vee limo. He was impressed and gave Rey a warm smile.

"I wanted to make sure you were comfortable," she said in explanation. "There's enough room inside you can sit normally." She glanced at the driver who was now climbing out of the vehicle and moving to open the rear door for them. "He's a mortal, an employee of the limo service, and knows nothing about the supernatural. While there will be a privacy window between him and us, we'd best limit talk of more esoteric subjects."

Rey entered the limo first, treating Richard to a quick glimpse of long, shapely leg as she settled herself into her seat. The limo was a mid-sized one, with two benches of seats facing each other in the back. On the driver's side of the car, between the two benches, was a tall console with compartments, and in the larger bottom one was a stainless steel thermos.

"I tried to make some gluhwein," Rey said, pronouncing it "glue vine", and her fingers lightly caressing the lid of the thermos. "I've never had it before, so I hope I did it right. I think it tastes pretty good, so I suppose that's all that really matters, right?"

Rey reached out and rested her hand on his. "I just want to say how happy I am you're coming with me tonight."

"As am I," he replied. He smiled and relaxed into the seat. He turned his hand over so he could hold hers.

She slid her fingers between his and curled them, enjoying how her hand nestled so perfectly within his. Rey shifted slightly, moving to sit so their bodies were almost touching. What she wanted was to be sitting in his lap, his arms wrapped around her and holding her there but, like with everything else she wanted, it would have to wait. If she wanted this relationship to reach its fullest potential, she would have to let him set the pace. There was, however, nothing wrong with giving him little signs and encouragements now and again.

"Would you like to know more about the Twelfth Night feast we're going to?"

"Yes, please. If you don't mind," he said. "All I know of it is that it's some kind of medieval celebration."

"Twelfth Night is traditionally the last day of the winter festivals, and, as it sounds, the twelfth day of Christmas. One final celebration, governed by the Lord of Misrule and everything is turned on its head. Kings and nobles become peasants for a day, and vice versa. Once everyone arrives and is seated, they will be handing out little cakes. One of the cakes for the men contains a bean, and one for the women contains a pea. Those who find them become king and queen and "rule" the feast until midnight.

"The meal will be divided up into two different sections, which they call locals and guests. Those who are in costume will be considered locals, and they will be served the way it would have been done in the time of Henry VIII, the time period the feast is set in. The guests are people who aren't in costume, like us, are served as normal, with forks and knives and so on. During dinner, there will be entertainment, just like there would have been during one of Henry's feast. I think the website said period-style music and some other things.

"Before and after dinner, there will be some outdoors things people can do, such as walk in what they call their winter garden, and they've got some areas set up like an idealized sixteenth century street and marketplace. They've also got indoor things to do, for those who do not wish to brave the cold."

He cocked his head curiously. "That does sound fascinating. I'm looking forward to this." He smiled.

"So am I," Rey admitted. She sat there quietly for a moment, looking at their intertwined fingers, then at his face. After letting out a little resigned sigh, she gave in to what she'd wanted to do since she'd set eyes on him in his doorway. "Would you mind terribly if I kissed you?"

He immediately turned, gathered her up and gave her a deep, passionate kiss that made her toes curl and her skin tingle. She kissed him back, using what skills she had to return the favor. When it finally, regretfully, ended, she looked at him with all the desire she felt for him burning in her eyes. "Feel free to kiss me like that whenever you want." Her lips felt deliciously bruised, and her hands cupped his face for a moment before moving upwards to run lightly over his head, her hands sliding across his skin unobstructed by the horns she knew were there. "Your Mask is nice," she whispered, "but I do love the look of the other you too." She wanted to say more, to itemize everything about him that intrigued and aroused her, but decided discretion was the better part of valor.

"I hope it is not to shameful to say, but I adore your fae appearance. Yet, I'm very glad to have a chance to see what you looked like before." He was speaking of her Mask, of course, and how it looked before she was Taken. In a sense, it was an intimate look inside another changeling.

A shy little smile danced on Rey's lips and she ignored the faint flutter of nerves at the compliment. "I wasn't as beautiful as I am now," she said, simply stating a fact.

"Perhaps. Or perhaps it was there, just in another form," he suggested.

"So my friends tried to convince me. It's difficult to be objective about my life before I was taken." She gave a wry little laugh. "Much of what I was then was bound up in the scars on my back that made me feel like such a freak and filled me with self-pity. I had a lot of growing up to do."

"Scars?"

Rey nodded. She'd survived things far worse since then, and now they were simply a part of her, like her hair or her brambles. "You'll see some of it when I take off my coat, but that's only because of how I chose to appear tonight. Otherwise they kind of just blend in to the rest of me." She touched his face again, caressing the strong line of his jaw. Should she tell him how it happened? Would revealing that part of her past be giving too much? Still, it's not like he couldn't find it all out on the internet if he did a bit of searching. The official version anyway, not the truth.

"Just before my eighteenth birthday, my parents were murdered in our home. The man who killed them cut up my back pretty bad before he was chased off by the sound of the approaching police sirens." It was strange talking to Richard about it. In the past, she'd have felt anger and fear, but now she felt nothing. It was as if it had happened to somebody else. Now, she thought, I think I understand how Lyla and Chaska feel about the past. It doesn't matter anymore, so why worry.

"I'm sorry for your loss," Richard empathized. "That is a terrible way to lose your family. I apologize if I brought up bad memories."

"There is no need to apologize because I don't remember it," Rey admitted. "What I know is only what other people have said."

He nodded. "Perhaps there is some blessing in that."

"And we should be thankful for all those we have." She was looking at one right now, she thought. "What about you? Do you have any family?" We had better keep talking, Rey said silently to herself, or I will kiss you now, seemliness of it be damned.

"No one close," he replied, then paused. "Well. I had a wife once. When I was young and before I was Taken. She fell in with a... very bad crowd and I lost her. Or she left me. I was never certain which it was. I only knew it had made me angry enough to go after the people who'd taken her from me. I'm pretty sure that would have ended badly for me, but my Keeper interfered and took me instead."

"I apologize if that brings back bad memories," Rey said.

He stared out the window and said, "That's all in the past now, but one day. One day I'll have my chance. I'll have my revenge on those bloodsucking bastards."

Rey blinked in surprise. "She was taken by vampires?" This was not good news, she thought. If he finds out what Remy is, things might get very ugly. "Do you know who they were?"

He shook his head slowly. "Not all of them. I was following her to find out, but I only saw one. A woman." He sighed. "It was a very long time ago."

"How old are you?" she asked. Time could pass so differently for changelings while they were in the hands of their Keepers.

He hesitated. "Does it really matter?"

"No." Rey shook her head. "I was just wondering if every man I fall in love with older than I am." She blinked, and trying to change the subject quickly said, "I was 21 when I was Taken, and spent three years in my Keeper's tender care."

He blinked, mentally stumbling over the the "L" word. "I, ah..." A small smile pulled at the corners of his

mouth.

"Oh, heck," she said, then slid her hands behind his head and kissed him. Rey wanted him to feel the way he made her feel, curling hooves and all. He turned to meet her lips, just managing to hold back from devouring her.

The time for talking had past, at least for now. The rest of the car ride they were content to simply enjoy their new-found closeness.

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Remy frowned at the apartment building Mizuko lived in as his car pulled up in front. If the exterior was anything to go by, the interior must be awful. If Mizuko would let him, he'd have arranged for a nicer place for her to live, but she was adamant, perhaps even offended, by his offer. If she wanted to live in such a horrid place, then so be it, but the minute he could, she and her friend Amber would be moving. Until then, Remy would take her places and show her things that just might encourage her to want to better her living situation. Ideally, Amber would be gone too, but he knew enough of Mizuko to know she needed someone to watch over most of her mundane life, like paying the bills on time.

When his car came to a stop, Remy stepped out and entered the building, suppressing a shudder as he did so.

Mizuko stepped carefully into plain black high heels she thought wouldn't clash with the style of her dress.

Amber, sitting cross-wise in a used over-stuffed chair she picked up somewhere eyed Mizuko critically. "Zuko, you really should have let me take you shopping for different shoes."

"They don't work?" Mizuko signed.

"They're okay. But the dress is really nice and you are wearing 'okay' shoes that originally went with a set of clothes more appropriate for harlots, not formal dates."

Mizuko patiently signed, "I told you. I can't afford the shoes you wanted me to get. I need to live within my means."

Amber rolled her eyes. "Who does that? Live within your means. It's like un-American or something. Anyway, it's just money. You'll make more next month."

Mizuko sighed. It wasn't the first time they'd had this conversation.

"You are not going to wear that ugly abominable snow-man coat with it are you?" Amber asked her pointedly.

"Well, I..." Mizuko started to sign.

"Good lord." Amber rolled her eyes. "Here. You can wear one of mine. Just... try not to stain it. It's dry clean only, so no swimming in it." The attractive, green-eyed redhead swung her legs off the arm of the chair and got up. She was wearing a long tee, the one with teddy bears on it that she liked to sleep in and pink bunny slippers. She was comfortable enough around Mizuko that she thought nothing of wandering around the apartment in underwear and sleeping clothes. The shirt was long enough it hid her lacy underwear anyway. Amber opened the sliding door to the closet next to the outside door and picked out a dark green waist coat. It wasn't perfect but it was a lot better than what Mizuko had.

There was a knock at the door and Amber grinned impishly. "Hey your date's here!"

Mizuko shook her head with widened eyes and Amber pretended not to see her friend wanted her to get away from the door. "I'll get it!" she said loud enough to be heard through the door. Then she reached the handle and opened it wide while Mizuko sighed helplessly.

Remy, wearing a custom tailored silk tuxedo, looked completely out of place in the shabby cabbage and curry-smelling hallway. His eyes quickly took in the girl's appearance and then he nodded his head slightly in greeting. "You must be Amber."

"Hi," Amber said with a grin. "You must be Mr. Amazing."

Mizuko arrived and pulled Amber out of the doorway and behind her. With her back to Remy, Mizuko fixed Amber with a stern stare before she turned back to Remy with a slight, apologetic smile on her lips.

To the mortal eye, Mizuko's dress was a simple green satin shift, covered by a layer of black lace. To those who could see past the Mask, it was much more. The underdress was pale green and shimmered at the wearer's slightest movement, and was covered by living seaweed that would shift gently as if being moved by the tides.

Beads of crystalized water were woven into an intricate three-rowed pattern on ice spider silk around a teardrop-shaped translucent pearl. At random, wave-like ripples start from the center of the pearl and radiate out through the beads to disappear once they reach the clasp. To the mundane eye, however, the necklace was made of diamonds, with a large pearlescent bead chased with silver wire.

The vision of her in the dress Rey had made for her was interrupted when Amber draped the coat she'd selected over Mizuko's shoulders, then put her chin on Mizuko's shoulders and asked her if her date had any friends. Mizuko only rolled her eyes.

It took all his years of training and discipline not to gawk at Mizuko's dress, and gratefully turned his attention to the girl's question. "I do, in fact, have several friends. One of them would find you extremely enticing, but he is otherwise occupied at the moment." He was not about to set Carson on the poor girl, but she would be far safer on Wilson's arm, given he had absolutely no interest in the female sex, not even as a source of vitae.

The thought of getting Amber involved with one of his coterie members, however, would certainly solve several potential problems. Wilson might, in fact, be the ideal choice, though he would need to learn more about Amber's tastes, wants and desires first.

"You look wonderful as always, Remy," Mizuko signed to her date. "Pardon me for one moment."

She turned to face Amber and rapidly signed to her that she was only 17 and Remy's friends were all much older.

Amber laughed and said quite clearly, "Ha! I bet I'm older than you." Remy couldn't see what Mizuko signed in response, but Amber rolled her eyes.

Mizuko turned back to Remy and sighed. "Roommates."

"Otherwise occupied, huh?" Amber prompted, ignoring Mizuko. "Well if he's cute, maybe next time."

"Women find him quite attractive," Remy replied. "And his status would undoubtedly change should he ever see your bunny slippers. He has quite a passion for them." A strong loathing for them, in fact, but that was neither here nor there. And hopefully that information, Remy thought, might turn her thoughts away from his friends and onto other more suitable topics for a young woman.

Amber's mouth twitched in amusement, ready to continue their repartee, but Mizuko interrupted. "Goodbye, Amber."

Amber laughed, waved, and turned to head to the bedroom.

Remy watched her go, then offered Mizuko his arm. "Are you ready to go?"

"I am ready," she signed. She glanced at his arm but didn't take it. Instead she waited.

He smiled and leaned in to whisper in her ear "I thought you might prefer your kiss, and my appreciation of what you're wearing, somewhere more private. However, if you'd like it here for the whole world to see..."

She tilted her head and studied Remy for a moment. He was usually very conscious about the kiss since it kept the promise they'd made to each other alive, yet perhaps it would not hurt to wait if that was his preference. She wondered if Amber had bothered him. That thought made her a little sad. She cinched the coat closed, stepped into the hall with Remy and closed the door.

Before she released the doorknob his lips captured hers as he slipped an arm around behind her to hold her close - and support her should her knees become weak again. She made a surprised sound and stiffened for a moment, but then quickly became an active participant in the kiss.

All too soon, the kiss ended. He released his tight hold on her so he could see her face. "Good evening, ma petite. You look exquisite."

She dipped courteously and said, "Thank you, sir," then put her hand on his arm. She held her face calm and collected but the color of her cheeks betrayed the heat he'd aroused in her.

"Shall we go to the car to finish this conversation?" Remy's smile was flirtatious, and his eyes told her he knew exactly what she was feeling.

She nodded in response, eyes sparkling.

He led Mizuko down to the car, trying to ignore the horrid surroundings they were, and hid a sigh of relief. Once they were ensconced comfortably in the car and on their way, Remy stroked her dress, marveling it at. "I have never seen anything like this before."

Mizuko leaned against him and placed her mouth near his ear. "Thank you," she said in a near-whisper. "It was hand-made. A gift."

"It... it looks alive." He watched the invisible tide move the seaweed. "Who made it?"

"Rey did. She's a talented person. It is not made of anything of this world, though the dress mortals see probably looks more mundane. All things fae are protected by the Mask, lest mortals see something they should not. Unless, of course, a fae beings wills it to be so."

Remy did not let his surprise at the crafter of such a phenomenal dress. He'd thought the gown he'd purchased for Mizuko, on the premise of her "borrowing" it as a work of art on her. It was a burlap sack compared to what she wore now. "Is it difficult to do?" What might it cost him, he wondered, if he was to commission a piece from Rey as a gift.

"I would think so, though she's made several very interesting pieces. But her skills run along those lines. I suspect she spent a lot of time making it — and acquiring the materials might have been quite... an adventure in itself. So I wear it only for official functions — or formal ones. It's the only one I have."

The vampire nodded. "I hope you will be warm enough," he said. "It is supposed to be unseasonably cold tonight. I brought a heavier coat for myself, and a very warm wrap you can borrow if need be."

"*You are very thoughtful,*" she said, giving his leg an appreciative squeeze.

His shoulders moved in a negligent shrug. "I am a gentleman, and as such, these are things I should do."

"*Yet, I am no lady,*" Mizuko said with a naughty curl of her lips. She sighed sensuously into his neck. "*So you are doubly appreciated.*"

"Every woman is a lady," Remy said immediately, "even when they demonstrate otherwise." He put a finger under her chin and tilted her face away from his shoulder so he could see her. "Are you trying to get me into trouble with Miss Lafitte?" he asked with a chuckle.

Her eyebrows rose. "*I wouldn't want that, Remy,*" she said.

"She told me very specifically that we both need to arrive at the renaissance faire grounds clothes unrumpled and smelling like we'd just taken a shower and not like we need one."

Mizuko looked completely surprised, then burst out in one of her rare laughs that made her seem all the more beautiful. "*I was referring to the fact I was fae, and you have to be human to be a lady, don't you?*" She flashed him a fox-like smile wide enough to show teeth. "*Though I suppose your insinuation is just as true.*"

"And what am I insinuating?"

"*That you might leave us with rumpled clothes and in need of a shower if you didn't treat me as a lady.*" She looked slightly smug, thinking she'd got the better of that exchange.

"If I ever find the person who made you believe you were not a lady, or that a lady could not have passionate, intense sex, they would not find so much as a drop of blood or a hair left of him."

She shifted in the seat, drawing back to study him, her amused expression fading quickly. "*You are a gallant man,*" she said. But she silently wondered if he felt this way about all women, or if there was something in particular about her that inspired her. There was a not-so-small part of her that hoped that it was in some part about her. But she was too afraid of shattering her fantasy to risk asking.

She looked away and wondered if he might be right, that someone had made her think she was less of a lady and not just cool logic. If it could be anyone it would have to have been her Keeper, the one that enslaved her for six years and made her use her sex appeal to destroy young men.

Mizuko felt Remy take her hand and press a kiss lightly on her fingers. "Every woman, human, fae, vampire or werewolf, has a lady hidden inside them somewhere. Sometimes, horrible things happen that makes the woman think it is impossible for them to be one. I know there is one in you, Mizuko. I want you to find her, to meet her. I want you to see what I see in you, to experience her in all her glory. You are unlike any woman I have ever met, and I want you to realize it too."

She watched him a moment while she put her thoughts together. "*You say these things to me, and I appreciate them. I honestly do, because you are the only man who says them to me. Your treatment of me makes me treasure every moment I'm with you. But I hope you don't think I'm made of glass, or that I have low self esteem. I don't. I'm comfortable with myself. I like who I am.*" She cupped one of his hands in hers. "*I enjoy playing the part of your princess but I hope you don't mind if I don't always want to view myself that way.*"

Remy nodded and settled back against the seat.

The parking lot outside the main gate of the Mythic City Renaissance Faire was about a quarter full, and a line of cars, limos and taxis were dropping off their passengers. There were "guards" at the entrance to the faire, greeting the arrivals, checking tickets and handing out the souvenir tokens of the evening. Beyond the gate, the path was lit by a series of torches on tall, sturdy poles, and there were people in period costumes singing. Excitement and expectation hung in the air.

The two couples had arranged to meet with their respective dates at the gate. Mizuko and Remy hadn't been waiting very long when the hum-vee limo pulled up and Richard held Rey's hand as she exited the vehicle.

One look at Rey's face and Mizuko knew her friend was happy, from the smile on her face to simply the way she moved. The expression on the fairest's face faltered for a moment when she saw Remy, but it was gone so fast Mizuko thought she must have imagined it.

Remy did not miss it either, but the dictums of etiquette and propriety meant he would have to wait to find out what was wrong. While he and Miss Lafitte were far from being friends, he'd felt they'd reach a kind of amicable truce.

"Rey," Mizuko signed using Glymjack Cant. "You look amazing. Especially when you smile." She turned to Richard and asked, "You must be Richard? This is a treat. I haven't seen you like this before. You look dashing, as well."

"Doesn't he just." Rey's smile widened as she looked up at him. "She said it's a treat to see you like this, and that you look dashing." She just couldn't keep the pleasure she felt at being with him tonight contained.

Richard bowed formally and said, "Thank you, Legate. It is my honor to be in the presence of two of the finest Ladies of the... that I know." He turned to Remy and paused.

Mizuko hurried to sign, "Please meet my date tonight, Remy Deprez. Remy, this handsome mountain is also known as Richard."

As Rey translated for Richard, Remy bowed, slightly lowering his head but his eyes never leaving Richard's face. "An honor to meet you, sir," the vampire said, silently and automatically evaluating the combat potential and danger level the large man would present. The sheer size difference between Richard and Rey was pronounced and dramatic. Remy didn't know very much about werewolves other than they were dangerous opponents. Any woman who could keep up with one, especially in bed, would have to be formidable. For a moment, he wondered what it would be like to taste such delights that Miss Lafitte would offer, but pushed it from his mind. She was off-limits.

Rey caught Mizuko's eye, and signed, "If Richard were to find out what Remy is, it would be Bad."

Knowing that neither of the men could understand the unique signs they were using, Mizuko asked, "He has a problem with the vampires. Then I must portray Remy as an ensorcelled mortal that knows a little of changelings. Please tell him that he needn't be quite as guarded with his speech when it is just the four of us. If it's okay with you, I'll sign Remy so that he understands the situation and doesn't make a mistake."

"What if something comes up and Richard expects to Remy to be able to see through a Mask?" Rey quickly signed, her eyes flicking to Remy for a moment.

"I'll handle it," Mizuko said, continuing in Glymjack. "I have partially ensorcelled him, so that he sees me in

any case. He understands that what he sees is not the measure of a changeling, that he should be cautious."

Then the nymph turned to Remy. She switched to American sign, so that he understood, clearly. "I apologize for using a different language. Rey does not know ASL, only the code you saw just now. From what she just told me, I need to ask you to be careful around Richard. It would be best if he never knows you are a vampire. Richard is a changeling, you see. He's actually much bigger and stronger than he looks right now. I've seen him cut a goblin knight in full metal armor in half, rip a tree out of the ground to use as a battering ram. During the War, he led a small army. Now he is the personal guard of my Queen, called the Paladin of Shadows.

"Actually, I think you will like him. He is very polite, and very careful so as not to crush the things and people he touches," Mizuko concluded.

Remy nodded. "How close are they?" he signed. "I would have thought Chase would be her date tonight."

As Mizuko signed to Remy, Rey spoke softly with Richard. "Mizuko just told me that Remy has been partially ensorcelled, He can see only her fae appearance, and knows a little bit about changelings, so we don't need to be quite so guarded in our speech around him."

He looked impressed. "Really? That's creative." He nodded his understanding.

Mizuko signed an answer to Remy. "I don't know, but they seem happy. I haven't seen Chase with Rey for a couple months. They might not be an item anymore."

"Curious," Remy mused, and filed that information away.

As the two couples stood and talked, a steady stream of people walked past them and through the gates. Rey slipped her hand onto Richard's arm. "Are you ready to head on in?" Everyone agreed.

When they reached the gates, Rey produced the tickets she purchased, and the people at the gates presented each of them with a pewter coin. One side of it has the symbol of the Mythic City Renaissance Faire, and the other had the date inscribed around a crowned jester.

As they walked through the gates, they got a better look at the pathway to the hall where the dinner was to be held. Couples were strolling hand in hand or arm in arm. Singers in costume sang in harmony, entertaining the visitors. Up ahead, they could see the path forked to the left and right. There was an ornate arch at the beginning of each path, decorated with pine boughs, flowers and holly. The path to the left, everyone seeming to go in that direction paused and kissed before continuing on. To the right, the people just walked through as normal.

"Welcome, good gentles," the man standing between the gates said with a bow. "You must make your first decision of the evening, but both paths will lead you to the feast. The path to the right will take you there, but the path to the left will get you to the hall faster. But if you wish to use the left-hand path, you must kiss the person who follows immediately behind you, rather than pay coin of the realm."

Rey chuckled, amused at the choice to make. She knew which she wanted, and looked up at Richard. "Which path do you wish too follow?" Richard looked thoughtful, trying to work out logistics.

"I offer you the same choice, Mizuko, Which path would you prefer?"

Mizuko barely paused or slowed down. Keeping the coin clenched in her fist, she headed directly to the left, then paused to see who would follow.

Richard looked back and forth. He didn't much care for the idea of a stranger kissing Rey, and yet while

Mizuko was easy on the eyes, he couldn't run up there and steal a kiss from Remy's date just so that he could (potentially) get a kiss from Rey. He realized that in one stroke, Mizuko had decided the game, whether she'd meant to or not.

He told Rey, "Some things are worth any price." He aimed them toward the right hand path. "And some things are too priceless to be shared."

Rey was surprised by Richard's choice. It was just a kiss, but his words transformed it into something else. She looked up and wondered about the man at her side. Once they were a ways down the path and out of sight of anyone, she softly asked "Is that true? Are my kisses that valuable to you?"

He smiled. "I wouldn't say it if it were untrue."

Rey's little sigh was full of happiness and longing. "You say such beautiful things. If they came from anyone else, I'd have laughed them away instead of holding them close to my heart." She felt a bit foolish saying that, but it was the truth.

The path they'd chosen took them through the "town square" of the renaissance faire, permanent structures used during the faire season. People in costume - obviously working the night's event - stood scattered around, greeting the visitors as they passed. Before long, though, Richard and Rey found themselves approaching the Great Hall. The doors were open wide, and the lights and cheer of the season spilled out to welcome them to the party.

Just inside the door there was a coat check, and they paused so Rey could relieve herself of her coat as it would not be needed inside. With her back to Richard, she removed her coat to reveal her strapless gown beneath, with his assistance. He hung the coat, but stole a look at her while he did so. It was chocolate brown, almost the exact same shade as her coat, with laces of green holding it tight around her torso while the skirt draped loosely down around her hips and legs. It was then he noticed the scars she had mentioned. They were long healed but not faded, and shot up from beneath her bodice like a spray of long slender reeds. One curved up up her back and halfway along her shoulder blade.

He frowned inwardly, noting that someone had truly wanted Rey to die when they did that to her. It must have been a miracle to survive it, he thought. His line of thought inevitably brought him to wonder who could possibly have wanted to hurt her so badly at a time when she must have been quite young.

He put his coat away as well, then caught Rey's hand, turned her around, and told her, "You look amazing in that dress, Rey." He looked down at her and realized the strapless cut of her dress revealed to him enough of her soft breasts to increase his heart rate substantially.

"I'm glad you like it," she replied with a little smile. She'd bought it with tonight in mind, wanting something elegant but simple. "Would you like to go find our seats, or take a quick peek at the marketplace?"

He was more interested in seeing what Rey thought was interesting. "I think that might be educational," he said with a nod. Together, Rey once again on Richard's arm, they strolled into the marketplace. The room was decorated to look like what must have been a guild hall of some kind, with banners and signs of all kinds. There was a wide range of vendors, selling all manner of handcrafted goods and artwork.

Rey gave cursory glances at the clothing, both medieval and fantasy-inspired. Nothing there caught her eye, nor did anything carved of wood or stone. A beautifully carved man's belt, decorated with an intricate geometric pattern, got her attention, though. "This is nice, don't you think?"

He nodded, somewhat neutrally. "The craftsmanship is impressive."

They browsed through a few more booths, until a little exclamation burst from Rey. They'd come across a

jeweler and glassblower's stall, with a wide variety of wares on display. Her attention was drawn to a set of jewelry, matching earrings, necklace, bracelet, and a strange-looking ring. "Your work is exquisite," she said to the artist, an older gentleman wearing a leather jerkin and brown hose. "I've never seen a set of jewelry that includes a belly button ring."

"It is not something I normally do, m'lady," he replied with a slight smile, "but it is a form of decoration that is becoming more popular. It seemed the right thing to do when I designed it." Made of silver, all the pieces were set with tiny red and green gems, with silver leaves on slender chains.

When Rey saw the price tag for the set, she sighed. "Outside my budget for tonight, I'm afraid. Do you have a card so I can contact you next payday and buy it, if someone else doesn't snatch it up before then?" The man gave her a card, which she tucked into the small evening purse she carried. Before they left the stall, she did buy a pair of small handblown perfume bottles, and she arranged for them to be mailed to her, rather than carry them around all night.

Pleased with her purchase, she looked up at her companion. "Is there anything you'd like to look at, or shall we continue to indulge me?" she asked with a laugh.

He chuckled. "I don't need anything," he replied. "So by all means, indulge." He'd been watching everything she was looking at, nodded at some things she showed him and otherwise filed away the insight for later.

Rey continued to lead him from stall to stall, looking at everything, and showing her appreciation of the artisan's skills with words of praise. She purchased a few more pieces - a vase and some hand-thrown ceramic serving platters and bowls. Finally, she shook her head and laughed. "We'd better leave," she said, "before I max out my credit card."

He smiled. "And I wonder if Mizuko and her date are wondering where we went by now."

"Shall we go find them?"

"Indeed," he said, then offered her his arm. "Onward."

Remy was one step behind Mizuko, keeping an eye on both her and the people approaching from behind. When they were a few feet from the arch, he sped up and turned so he was facing his date and walking backwards. "It's time to pay the toll, *ma petite*." He looked past her to the young men behind them and with a look, warned them to stay back.

Returning his gaze to Mizuko's face he said, "This should be short, for we do not wish to hold up the line, nor put on a show for strangers."

Her choice of shoes tonight had put her height much closer to his than usual. She looked at him with amusement in her eyes. She said nothing, letting him try to guess what she was thinking, but leaned toward him for his 'chaste' kiss.

How he could kiss her with such heat and need, yet devour her mouth was beyond Mizuko. When he pulled away, all her senses were on fire and aware of him.

Mizuko glanced behind her to see if there was anyone immediately following. Rules were rules, after all and by taking this route, she'd agreed to them, even if that meant kissing someone she didn't know. Fortunately (or perhaps unfortunately) there was nobody waiting to go through the arch, and the man overseeing the entrance to the paths bade Mizuko and Remy to continue on their journey.

Mizuko turned back to Remy, her eyes still hungry for him, and put her hand in the crook of his arm. She

took only passing note on what was going on around her as he led her away. The man at the arches were correct - their journey along the left-hand path was short and they were in the Great Hall after a few short minutes stroll.

Remy helped Mizuko remove her coat and turned it over at the coat check, and then with her on his arm again, they went deeper into the building. The entrance gallery had two sets of large double doors leading to the interior rooms. One set opened to what was obviously the room where the meal would be served, and the other to what appeared to be an indoor marketplace.

Mizuko looked around at the dining room and the people gathering there, then took a long, curious look in the direction of the marketplace. After a moment, she sent an inquisitive look up at Remy.

"Did you want to do a bit of shopping before we go in to table?" Remy asked.

In reply, Mizuko brightened and smiled at him. He led her into the room and moved to the left. "Is there anything in particular you'd like to look for, or shall we browse?"

Having never been to something like this before, she had no idea what might be offered. She shrugged one shoulder and lifted her hand palm up.

As they wandered through the market, Mizuko mostly ignored clothing, crafts and accessories, but the first place that featured jewelry caught her complete attention. She drifted to a wood framed display case with glass panels and stared down at rings, necklaces and bracelets in particular. Her eyes were drawn toward the silver, pewter and white gold pieces, as well as those that featured blue or green crystals. She didn't seem to differentiate between the cheaper pieces of pewter and cut glass, and the white gold with actual gemstones. Instead, she viewed them with an eye for purely aesthetic value rather than actual.

When the proprietor asked if she could get anything for her, Mizuko didn't answer but simply kept looking.

"We're just browsing, thank you," Remy assured the man. He watched Mizuko, wondering what, if anything, would catch her eye. The vampire had more than enough money to buy anything on display.

She finally went back to a pair of bracelets, clearly meant to be worn together. They featured a large stone set in the rune-covered silver, right in the middle. They were each about as big as a thumb print and featured colors of green and blue swirled together. Her eyes narrowed as she evaluated them and she straightened.

That's when her eyes caught sight of a long pewter chain hanging from a wood hook set in a support post near the display case. The four foot piece featured stones and enameled panels that ranged from green to blue. She touched it carefully with a finger as if testing it. It must have passed whatever test she was trying because then she picked up part of the chain and moved it so that the light hit it in different ways. Pleased with the find, she smiled.

"Do you like it?" asked the proprietor. Mizuko turned to look. The woman was middle-aged and wore her hair up and fixed in place with long silver picks. She had on a dark brown leather bodice over a billowy white blouse cut low enough to expose a generous amount of pale breast. The effect seemed almost to cup her breasts like an offering. Her eyes kept drifting away from the shopping Mizuko and instead looking at her handsome date.

Mizuko nodded, then opened her purse as if to look for her wallet. She knew she didn't have the money for something like that, but it seemed like that's what she was supposed to do. The only things she expected to find was her brass knuckles and a little coin purse. What she actually found was that someone had stuffed her purse full of condoms.

Mizuko gasped in utter surprise. On the top was a little post-it that said, "Have a great time Zuko!" She

recognized her roommate's handiwork. There was also a little roll of a half dozen ten dollar bills. She snapped the purse closed before too many people saw what was in it. She stood with Amber's post-it stuck to one finger, the roll of bills in the other hand and a growing look of consternation. How was she going to easily find her brass knuckles with all those condoms in the way, she wondered irritably.

Remy would not help but give the woman an appreciative look and smile before turning his attention back to his date. "Something wrong?" he asked, seeing the expression on her face.

She looked at the post-it and cash in her hands and sighed. She shook her head no, balled up the post-it, and put the cash on the counter. She signed to Remy, "My roommate left me a surprise. And some money. Will you ask this lady what she wants for this piece?" Mizuko pointed at the long pewter piece hanging on the wooden hook.

Remy nodded, and turned this attention to proprietress. "My good lady," he said, giving the woman a devastating smile. "What is the asking price for that lovely chain?"

"Sixty dollars," she replied.

Mizuko responded by pushing the little roll of tens toward her with a bright smile.

The woman picked up the money and checked the amount, then retrieved the chain. "Would you like to take it with you," she asked, "or would you like it mailed to you?"

She signed to Remy and let him translate, "With me is best." While the lady put the chain in a narrow box, she signed to Remy, "This was nice. Do you want to look for anything?"

Remy shook his head. "I believe we probably ought to go find Richard and Miss Lafitte." Even as he spoke, Mizuko saw Richard, head visible overtop everyone else, approaching. Mizuko picked up her prize, put her hand in his arm, and went with him to meet up with the other couple.

"There you are," Rey said when she saw Mizuko and Remy. "You found something you liked? What did you buy?"

Remy's eyes fell on Rey, he was immediately struck by how beautiful Rey was. Every other time she'd seen her, she'd been either dressed for clubbing, or in a suit appropriate for work. This was the very first time he'd seen her when she'd made an effort to look her best. He wanted to throw all his good intentions out the window and have her.

Richard missed the fire of lust that raged in Remy's eyes for an instant, leaning down to see what Mizuko held out for Rey and he to see.

"That's beautiful," Rey said, picking up slightly out of the box to get a look at the enameled pieces. "It suits you."

Remy remained quiet, not trusting himself to speak quite yet, not until he had himself back under control.

While she still had her hands free, Mizuko made a quick sign to Rey in Glymjack. "It looks good against my skin. I think it would make a very good impression even if I wore it nude."

Rey choked on a laugh. "I'm sure it would," she said aloud. To Richard and Remy, she added, "She was just telling me the different ways she thought she might look good wearing it."

A gentle gong sound floated through the air, summoning the gathered people in to the dining room. Wordlessly, Remy offered Mizuko his arm. Putting her hand on his arm as they walked together was quickly

becoming second nature to Mizuko and she did so almost without thinking about it. Richard reacted to the gong by offering to take Rey's hand as well, and together the small group looked for a place to sit. Rey happily put her hand in his and walked at his side into the other room.

The dining room was divided into two obvious areas. One side was long rows of table with benches on either side; the other was set up in a more traditional fashion. As the two couples walked toward the tables, a man wearing a tabard emblazoned with a jester wearing a crown approached. "Miss Lafitte?" At her nod, he bowed. "This way please. We were able to fulfill your request without any difficulty."

The table he led them to was off to one side and seated only four people. One of the chairs was larger than the others, designed to fit someone of Richard's size with ease. "The chair was provided by William Overton," the man explained. "His booth is at the far back corner of the merchant's room." Rey remembered the stall - the man had furniture of all kinds, from chairs to medieval-style chests.

"I appreciate the effort you and your people have gone to tonight." Rey smiled at him, and the young man blushed.

"It was no problem," he stammered. "Please enjoy your evening." He bowed, backed away and left.

Richard smiled widely. "That was very considerate of you, Rey."

"You wouldn't be able to focus on the pleasures of the evening," she replied, "if you weren't comfortable." Rey wanted to remove all the normal concerns from the evening, from being uncomfortable in the limo to constantly worrying about the chair beneath him breaking.

Mizuko watched the young man leave then turned to Rey. She used Glymjack Sign to ask, "I take it you will not be harvesting fear tonight?" She moved toward a regular sized chair. "Perhaps... another emotion?" The look she gave at Rey would have been completely straight and unaffected to the casual observer, but Rey knew her well enough to catch the very slight twitch of her lips and sensual narrowing of her eyes and realize Mizuko was playing.

"Perhaps," Rey signed in reply. "To induce is a delight. To reap the benefits, divine." She walked over to the chair to the left of Richard's and waited for him to join her.

While Richard pulled Rey's chair out for her and got her seated, Mizuko signed to her friend, "That sounds like poetry. Yours?"

"I don't know," Rey signed back as she smiled at Richard in thanks for his courtesy. "It just popped into my head, but it certainly describes how I feel."

Remy came up behind Mizuko and pulled her chair out, but his eyes were captured by Rey's form. Now that she was seated, he got a better view of the expanse of softly rounded flesh, and his lust flared higher. He felt his erection straining at the fabric of his trousers, and hoped he could get into his seat without it becoming obvious.

As Mizuko sat down she glanced up and noticed Remy's eyes were on Rey — she knew that expression and something in her chest went cold. So did her gaze as she watched Remy take his seat. She looked across at Rey, but she didn't seem to notice the way Remy was looking at her, nor did Richard.

Remy took his seat and focused his attention on Mizuko. He did not want to want Rey, so he concentrated on his date. He reached out to take her hand but paused, puzzled at the expression on Mizuko's face for a moment, then he realized he'd been caught. "I apologize," he signed earnestly in ASL. "I have never seen her look that way, but *you* are the woman I want."

"Are you quite certain?" Mizuko signed back. "You agreed to go on this date with me. If you now want to be with someone else, I need to know now."

"I cannot keep from being aroused by other women. I am what I am. But I am here with you, and that is exactly where I want to be."

Mizuko watched him unemotionally for a moment, then made a decision. "Being what I am, I sometimes forget that others are quite capable of lying. If you don't mind, I'll prefer to watch and see if your actions support your words."

Remy nodded. He would have to be extra careful with his behavior the rest of the evening. Perhaps, once the meal was over, he could persuade Mizuko to go for a little walk.

Rey, unaware of the conversation between Remy and Mizuko, watched Richard admiring her. She had a pretty good idea it was her breasts that had his attention. It was the second reason she'd bought this particular dress. The first reason was that she looked stunning in it. The third reason was that with the zipper hidden in the seam on the left side of the bodice made the dress easy to get into and out of.

Richard cleared his throat and blushed a little like a boy with his hand in the cookie jar. Except of course his hands at least were minding their manners. He cleared his throat as he sat down. "So. Is there a menu of some kind or is the dinner already decided?"

"The appetizer and dessert are set, but there is a choice of filet mignon or chicken picata," Rey replied, fighting back a smile. "They'll be taking our requests shortly." As she spoke, servers entered the room and began to place little cakes before the guests, green for the men, and rose red for the women. "Ah, these are the king cakes." She explained the man who found the bean would be king and rule over the feast, and the woman who found the pea would be queen.

Once the cakes were handed out, a man dressed like Henry VIII addressed the assembled diners. "Good evening, good gentles, and welcome to our feast to celebrate Twelfth Night. You have all been presented with a small king's cake. Be careful as you eat them, for there are little trinkets and charms inside. The gentleman who find the golden bean and the lady who finds the emerald pea shall be co-rulers over the festivities tonight. Once the Lord and Lady of Misrule are crowned, the feast shall begin."

With a smile, Rey broke her cake into four pieces, and discovered a small golden rose, the kind one might put on a charm bracelet. In his, Remy found a tiny horseshoe. Likewise, Mizuko broke hers apart to find a little golden star charm and Richard found an oak leaf.

The nymph picked up the shiny little charm she found and examined it curiously while she nibbled on a piece of her cake. It was a beautifully formed star, with filigree-like engraving on it in the pattern of stars upon stars.

Richard, too, picked his up and looked at it more closely. "What an ingenuous implementation of the old tradition," he remarked. The side of the charm was smoothly polished, but the other was engraved with filigree-like patterns, and for a moment, when the light hit it at a perfect angle, he thought he saw two letter R's intertwined. No matter how he tried, however, he couldn't find that angle again.

Remy wasn't superstitious, but he couldn't help wonder if the horseshoe was pointing up or down. He'd never been fond of little trinkets like these, thinking them more of a woman's thing. He set his little horseshoe aside and took a small bite of the cake. His kind were not meant to eat food, and he was going to pay for this indulgence later.

Rey picked up her napkin and polished her little rose until it gleamed. "This is so pretty," she exclaimed. "I guess I'm going to have to get a charm bracelet to put this on. What a wonderful little memento of the feast."

Mizuko nodded her agreement and got out her purse. She had to rummage around a lot of crinkling wrapped packages to find the bottom, but she did. With with a sudden smile she found her brass knuckles, too, and put them on top of the condoms.

Richard, of course, was the one able to see what was in her person most easily, though he didn't mean to. When he did, his eyes grew round and his eyebrows shot up in surprise. He quickly tried to look at anything else but her purse so that he wouldn't embarrass her.

"Are you alright, Richard?" Rey asked, seeing his distress but not knowing what the source of it was.

"Hm?" he asked. "Oh, ah perfectly fine," he assured her. "Just a little thirsty."

Mizuko looked up and Richard and mentally tracked the angle. Realizing she might have been the cause of the big guy's discomfort, she snapped her purse closed and put it aside, then tapped Rey's hand to get her attention. She signed in Glymjack, "Sorry, Rey. That's probably my fault. Amber stuffed my purse full of condoms." She paused, then added, "Do you need any?"

Rey smiled. "No," Rey signed back, glancing at Richard for a moment. "But I appreciate the offer." She didn't want to tell her friend she and Richard hadn't done anything more than kiss, out of respect for him.

Right on cue, the serving staff appeared, removing dirty plates, filling water goblets and placing glass carafes of red and white wine on the tables.

The man who had addressed the diners appeared at the head of the room to speak again. "We have found tonight's Lord and Lady of Misrule." A young woman, pushing an elderly man in a wheelchair, approached the speaker, while a middle aged woman wearing a bright red dress walked to meet them, an embarrassed expression on her face.

"Hey, I know that man," Rey said. "That's Sydney Kletterman. He owns the restaurant "Ionia", you know, that really expensive one downtown."

Mizuko was looking greedily at the wine and trying to decide which she'd like to try first, but Richard was paying more attention. "I don't think I've been to that one. How do you know Mr. Kletterman?" he asked Rey.

"I did some research into restaurants in Mythic," Rey said, "with a consultant's help. That's one of the reasons I was so busy before I was ki-- kindly reminded I needed to take a vacation. I was looking for an investment opportunity, a way to broaden my portfolio, so to speak. I ended up investing in the Pipe and Fiddle, the gastropub over on East Washington. The owners were looking to expand, and one of their investors backed out at the eleventh hour. I was able to help them out, and now I'm one of their relatively silent partners."

"No wonder you've been busy this past fall and early winter," Richard remarked. "I wish you the best fortunes in your new enterprise."

Mizuko looked up and signed twice, once in Glymjack and once in ASL. "That sounds like something we should drink to."

Rey favored Richard with a brilliant smile. "I will take all the well wishes I can get. Most restaurants don't last more than two or three years, and the new place cost a lot more than most. The brewing equipment and wine cellar alone cost over a hundred grand. I'll feel a lot more confident once they've been open for a month and all the kinks have been worked out." While she smiled, her brain was sorting out what Richard had said, filing it away for further reflection.

The rest of the meal passed quickly. The food was excellent, and Rey told Richard, with a twinkle in her eye,

that she chose the chicken so he wouldn't have to wince. While they were eating, they were entertained by singers and musicians, all performing songs appropriate to the holiday theme, without resorting to Jingle Bells and the like.

Rey found herself "accidentally" brushing Richard's hand several times during the meal, each time becoming more and more aware of his presence. She found herself wishing the event was over and they could be alone together again.

Richard ate with gusto, seeming very happy with the meal and the company. Rey noted he never pulled away when she brushed against him, but seemed to encourage it.

Mizuko had ordered the chicken. She ate part of almost everything, though she had only eaten a few nibbles from the chicken. She assured the staff that she enjoyed the meal very much, but apologized and said that her system was delicate. She was much less wasteful with any white wine that made its way into her glass.

The nymph wasn't blind to Rey's mood. She picked up on Rey and Richard's smiles, long looks, and frequent touches enough to realize they were looking forward to time alone. The thought made her happy for Rey because, no matter how big Richard was, he seemed a safer choice of mate than Chase had been.

Remy found it necessary to excuse himself partway through the main course and he retreated to the men's room. Rey's subtle seductive perfume had insinuated itself deep into his brain, making it nearly impossible to ignore his attraction to her. In the men's room, he eliminated both his rampant erection and the food sitting in his stomach in as little an embarrassing manner as he could. Afterwards, he felt eminently better and more in control of himself and he returned to the table, confident he had himself better under control.

Mizuko looked concerned when he returned to the table, and so asked if he was okay. She took his hand in hers even after he said he was fine, in an attempt to assure him. Remy raised her hand and pressed a lingering kiss on her fingers. "Now, I believe the evening will progress without any further problems."

When the dessert dishes were finally cleared, Rey gave up on all pretense and placed a hand on Richard's.

The man dressed as Henry VIII stood at the head of the room to speak to everyone one final time. "Good gentles, I hope you have enjoyed the feast. Your night of celebration is not yet over. In the Green Hall our musicians will be performing for your entertainment, and the Winter Garden and the High Street are open for your pleasure. I would also like to announce that, from both your generosity by purchasing tickets for tonight and the generosity of other sponsors, we have raised over fifteen thousand dollars for food banks, shelters, and soup kitchens through Mythic City. Thank you."

Richard took her hand in his and rose from his chair. "Would you care to come with me to the Green Room?" He hoped there might be dancing, as he rather enjoyed the little they did at Halloween.

"I'd love to," Rey replied.

Mizuko idly picked up and looked at the small amount of wine left in her glass while Richard spoke, then put it down and smiled. As Rey stood up, she signed, "This was a wonderful treat. I'm also glad to see you so happy to be with someone." She glanced meaningfully toward Richard while a little smile graced her lips.

"I'm glad you've enjoyed the evening so far," Rey replied aloud, "and I'm very happy." She gave Richard's hand a gentle squeeze. "When you decide to leave, try to find us to say goodbye, okay?"

Mizuko dipped her head toward Rey in unspoken promise.

The Green Hall was obviously so named because of the dark green paneling and the banners hanging from the ceiling. It wasn't as large as the dining hall or the room where the merchants were, but there was enough room for people to stand or sit around the outside of the room. The musicians, already playing, were on a low riser at the far end of the hall.

Richard led the way nearer to the musicians. It was more open there, while other people still shuffled around the edges while chatting with one another.

"So," Richard began, "you are an investor, a casino manager, and a Witch of the Bitter Wind. You are an impressive woman. How many other sides of Rey might there be?"

"Hundreds," she replied with a smile. "Perhaps thousands. It would probably take a lifetime to discover them all, if one were up to the task. I know I would enjoy exploring the sides of Richard I have not yet seen."

"I'm afraid I have only a front side, back side, and inside," he quipped. "I'm a man, you see," he added confidentially.

"A fact I am very aware of," she replied, her voice almost a soft purr. She gave in to her desire to touch him and placed her free hand on his chest. "I still would enjoy exploring your front and your back, but not your inside. Very messy and far too much paperwork." Rey kept a straight face, but watched his so as to see his reaction to her joke.

A smile spread across his features and lit his eyes. "That's oddly reassuring. And I'll admit that I've been enjoying your front and back sides all evening." He'd tried for brazen but ended up blushing anyway.

"Feel free to enjoy them as much as you like," she said, moving her hand up his chest and curling her fingers around the base of his skull, "and in almost any way you like, as you find yourself ready to." There, she thought, she'd given him permission to act as he wished, and told him it would happen at a pace he was comfortable with. Hopefully, this time, it was the right thing to say.

The band, almost as if on cue, started up playing a pleasant old tune.

Richard grew serious, then pulled her into his arms and hugged her tight. The motion lifted her off the ground so effortlessly, he didn't even realize her toes were dangling a foot off the floor. Then he kissed her passionately.

She returned the kiss in full measure, trying hard to neither devour him or lift one foot up in that ever so cliched manner. For a brief moment, nothing existed for Rey but Richard. As the rest of the world returned, the couple heard good natured applause, and the voice of an elderly woman saying "Oh, to be in love like that again," and requests to move so the rest of them could take advantage of the spot. Confused, Rey pulled her head back slightly and looked around until her eyes fell on the decorations above them. Laughing, she murmured into Richard's ear "We're under a bough of mistletoe."

"It must have been fate," he murmured in return. He set her down and let her go, then led her by the hand to a free space a few paces away. "So," he said once they faced each other again, "if you could do anything you wanted tonight, what would you do?"

"It's a toss up between leaving right now and going somewhere we can be alone together," she replied immediately, "or remain here for a few dances, take a turn around the Winter Garden and the High Street to see what was there, then say goodbye to Remy and Mizuko and go somewhere we could be alone. The important thing would be ending the night somewhere we can kiss without being interrupted." She wanted so much more than kisses, but she could wait.

"Ah, then let us begin. Will the lady dance with me?" Richard said with a slow, gracious bow.

"I would love to," Rey said with a smile, curtsying to him. When she rose, she stepped immediately into the dance. Truth be told, dancing was one thing she'd never enjoyed until the Hallowe'en ball. Turning around the floor on his arm was a joy. Richard led them through the first song and then another. They were beginning to lose track of time.

Mizuko turned in her chair to face Remy fully. "Are you sure you are really okay?" she signed. "I know that eating... food is not what your body is designed to do. It was thoughtless of me not to consider that before I asked you out and for that I'm sorry."

"Truly, I'm alright," he signed. "It's no longer in my system, so nothing to worry about. Now, what would you like to do?"

"May we talk about a couple things?"

"Certainly."

"I haven't had an opportunity to express to you what your help last month has meant to me. I have no recollection of what happened after I gave Rey's location when she was taken by that thing last month. It's all a fog in my mind, and I have no idea if I created problems for you. I would hope I did not, but even if that is true I want you to know I'm grateful for that." Worry flashed through her mind that she might have said or done something to compromise Remy, herself, or her people.

"There were no problems," Remy assured her.

"After Rey was rescued she went into an awful spiral. The creature must have torn pieces of her own soul away. It was like she had these wounds and as long as she languished, they would not heal. But starting at Christmas, she returned to herself and I think truly began to heal. I was able to do a couple things for her to help her get back on her feet, but I didn't do it alone.

"I want you to know that in part because of you, I was able to establish for fact that Marie and Rey are sisters. Twins, in fact. So one of the gifts I gave her for Christmas was family. I think it was the right thing to do because I've never seen her light up like that. Family might not be a big deal for some, but it is to her, and I think it was the key to helping her to the path of healing. Because it meant a lot to her, your help in it meant a lot to me."

"I did not play that much of a role," Remy said, downplaying his role in the whole affair. "All I did was provide a bit of information." He was glad, however, that his actions pleased Mizuko.

She looked at him, then leaned over and hugged him. It was a little awkward and uncertain, like she was unsure it was an appropriate response. He returned it, holding her gently so as not to crush her, but tight enough that she might realize she had done well with the gesture - and his enjoyment of it. Her uncertainty faded and when they parted, she found herself loath to let him go. She settled for just holding his hand in her lap.

She knew Remy disliked her current apartment. Despised might be a better word for it, actually. He'd made an argument for her to live somewhere nicer, better, but she'd thought it would be wrong for two reasons. First, she couldn't afford someplace nicer. Second, she thought if she accepted help from Remy she'd owe him. The truth was, she already owed him. He was just too much the gentleman to point that out.

It also occurred to her that he might not actually think of it as him doing a favor for her, but rather, her doing

him the favor of not having to see her in what he considered a dump. She also knew that if Amber had heard of Remy's offer, she'd have had the place packed and ready to go in a minute.

Also, she reminded herself, Remy had excellent taste in bedding.

She picked up her hands finally and said, "You may downplay it what you did for me the past month, but it's important to me." Then nibbled her lip while she hesitated, then said, "I remember when you asked me about Amber and I living someplace other than the apartment. You wanted me to move. Would that have meant something to you?"

Inside, Remy wanted to shout a very ungentlemanly yes, but he nodded. "It would. I know I wouldn't be as worried for you if you lived in a better apartment."

Mizuko signed, "Then I will do that. Wherever you want, so long as it's not too far from work."

"What of Amber," he asked. "Do you wish her to move with you?"

As Mizuko was about to reply, a sense of foreboding came to her, not related to the question Remy asked, but something here, at the Twelfth Night celebration.

Mizuko stood up suddenly, looking around. "The king," she signed. "The old man who was king may soon die." She focused on Remy. "Where is he?"

Remy stood and looked around the room, but couldn't see Kletterman. "I don't see him. We'll have to go looking." After his experience with Mizuko after her use of her ability to locate Rey, he had no reason to believe Mizuko was wrong.

She kept a hand on his arm as they began searching for the old man. She pointed the way toward the Green room, then waited for him to lead the way.

Remy put his hand on the small of her back as he guided her through the dining hall towards the strains of music floating on the air. He'd thought about offering his arm, but decided it would be better if she had her hands free. As they approached the room, they heard people talking about the mountain of a man kissing that beautiful woman under the mistletoe, and how romantic it was.

When they got to the doorway, they saw Richard and Rey dancing.

Mizuko threaded her way among the dancers directly to Richard and Rey. They were so involved, they didn't see Remy and Mizuko arrived. Mizuko put one hand on Richard's arm and the other on Rey's shoulder to stop them. Then she stepped back to let Remy explain.

Startled, Rey almost stumbled, and the look on Mizuko's face drove all thoughts of annoyance out of her mind. "What's wrong?"

"Mizuko says Mr. Kletterman is in danger." Remy's voice was soft, but urgent. "He's not in the dining hall, so we need to go look for him."

"Of course," Richard said. He looked at Mizuko. "Do you know what sort of danger he's in?"

Mizuko shook her head.

"All right." He took a look around the chamber, his height giving him an advantage. Unfortunately, Richard didn't see him either. "I don't see him here. Maybe we should split up to cover more ground."

"Do you have your cell phone, Remy?" Rey asked. He nodded.

"Okay. You and Mizuko check the left-hand side of the merchants hall, and then the Winter Garden. Richard and I will check the right-hand side and cover the High Street." Rey looked between the others. "Everybody okay with that plan?"

Richard said, "Let's go."

Mizuko nodded, then turned to begin her part of the search with Remy. A walk through their half of the merchant hall revealed he wasn't there, so the pair exited through the doors and into the Winter Garden. It was, in fact, a large greenhouse-like extension to the building. Filled with plants that needed protection from the elements, there were many different flowers and lush green plants, including a few dwarf citrus trees. Some of the orchids reminded Mizuko of the flowers that grew in Rey's hair, through their scent was nowhere near as seductive as Rey's. She stared at them, suddenly distracted, and murmured, "*Are those real?*"

Remy stepped forward and placed a quieting finger across her lips. "Yes, they are," he murmured in her ear. "We can talk about them later. Right now we need to find Mr. Kletterman. I don't see him here, so let's head over to the High Street thing and help Richard and Miss Lafitte."

Mizuko quieted, nodded, and turned to go toward High Street as Remy's cell phone rang. As he answered, Mizuko's sense of danger became more urgent.

Rey and Richard moved swiftly through the merchant's hall and failed to see Kletterman there. "He might be outside," Rey said. It was cold out, enough to want a coat, but there was no time to go to the coat check. "Let's go." Richard kept his eyes open, trying to spot the old man in the wheelchair.

It had gotten colder since they'd arrived at the faire grounds, and goosebumps immediately rose on Rey's bare skin. For a moment, she thought she saw a few snowflakes in the air. She and Richard hurried down the street, ignoring the things going on around them as they searched for Kletterman.

Suddenly, passing through a circle of light at the farthest end of the street, Richard saw the young woman who had been pushing the wheelchair. From what he could see from this distance, she seemed dazed, and she staggered a step.

"There!" he said, pointing. He moved swiftly that direction, his long stride forcing Rey to hurry nearly to jogging.

She awkwardly pulled her cell phone out of her tiny purse and dialed Remy's number. "We think we may have found him," she said without greeting or preamble. "The farthest end of the High Street. We're heading there now."

Remy put his phone back in his pocket. "Rey said they think they've found him. Let's go." Mizuko nodded and followed.

Rey followed as best she could, trying to move in a way more dignified than a trot. When she and Richard pulled up short next to the woman who had been with Mr. Kletterman, they could see her eyes were wide, but almost vacant, and she had a slightly bleeding bump on her head.

Mizuko, with Remy at the other end of the street, put her hand on his arm and pointed Richard out, then hurried that direction as fast as her heels allowed.

"Are you alright?" Rey asked, taking a step closer to the woman. She put a hand on the woman's arm and it

startled her to awareness.

"She took him," the woman said with a faint Russian accent. "Baba Yaga took him." She repeated the last phrase two times more before falling to her knees.

Richard frowned. "Where?" he asked her. "Where did Baba Yaga take him? Where are they going?"

"Through a whole in the wall that turned into thorns, thorns covered with ice." The woman began to rock back and forth silently, her arms wrapped tightly around herself.

"Please, lady. You must tell me exactly where this happened." Richard squatted beside her and tried to comfort her with a huge hand supporting her back.

Mizuko's voice seized attention. "*Thorns of ice*," she said. "*I know this dance. The Gate is this way. The other side of this building.*" She turned her eyes toward her friends. Her hand, on Remy's arm, felt cold as ice. "*If this is the work of a Keeper...*" She let the word hang. The way she said it, together with the witness account, sent chills of fear through all of them. "*I'll go look.*"

Richard rose to his full height. "If it is as you say, you will need my strength."

"*Strength will not prevail against the Others.*"

"And if it is not?"

Mizuko stared at him, then nodded.

Rey looked at Mizuko and quickly signed in Glymjack "Ask Remy to stay behind and protect the woman. I think he'd be more help back here, with her, than on the other side."

Mizuko nodded and turned to Remy, then rapidly signed to him. "Remy, where we will is not a place I would take you. It is a place of magic and it requires that magic to enter and leave. If something happened to us, then you would be trapped, vanished forever. We must see this through, not just for the old king, but because it threatens all of my kind here in this city. Therefore, I beg you to stay and see to this woman. It is rare in the extreme for a witness to something like this to survive. In fact, I have never heard of such a thing. It is important that nothing happens to her."

Remy wanted to protest, but his trust in Mizuko's judgment on this - and his chivalric nature - forced him to agree. That didn't mean, however, he couldn't follow and catch a glimpse of where they were going. "I will," he replied. "And come back in one piece."

Rey was squatting down next to the woman, murmuring softly in her ear while stroking her back comfortably. The young woman turned her head to look at Remy. "That's right," they heard Rey say. "Stay by him and he will protect you. You can trust him to keep you safe."

"Yes, Rey," the woman said faintly, though the complete and utter trust in what she'd been told by Rey rang clear in her voice.

Rey stood and took a step backward toward Richard. She looked at him and Mizuko. "Ready?"

Richard nodded, and Mizuko led the way to the gate. She pointed it out and Richard channeled a faint bit of glamour. A hole opened in the wall. Richard stepped through immediately, his Mask falling away as he did so. In his place stood the gigantic, horned minotaur he truly was.

""The Others respect strength. War forms, please."" Mizuko intoned with strength. She called upon her own

power. Water from the air suddenly coalesced beneath her feet into the purest crystal ice, making her seem to levitate inches off the floor. She arched her back and that crystal instantly grew to encase her for one, frozen moment. Then it shattered with a flash of white light.

In Mizuko's place stood what looked to be an ice sculpture of her. Elfin, alien, and beautiful, she stood poised for a moment then turned her head slightly. Remy thought he saw eyes flicker his way and a smile may have appeared upon translucent lips. Then she stepped through the portal.

Richard stepped had through immediately, his Mask falling away as he did so. In his place stood the gigantic, horned minotaur he truly was. He reached into the thorns and ripped out a brambly bundle. In his hands it snaked together into the rough shape of a huge battle axe.

Rey gathered the power she needed, and shifted into her wolf form when her foot touched ground inside the gate. Remy got a brief glimpse of a woman with moss for hair, surrounded by brambles before the brambles shifted and slid, wrapping around her then parting to reveal a wolf the size of a man, made of a patchwork of wood, flowers, thorns and fur. She turned her head back to look at the vampire, and he was startled to see two perfectly human eyes staring at him. She grinned at him, baring long, razor-sharp before the gate disappeared.

Rey moved ahead a step or two and sniffed the ground. "Dear god, something stinks of rot and long dead flesh."

"If that is the most recent scent, then we must follow. We haven't a lot of time. Once the trail goes cold, they are gone," Mizuko advised.

"Then we move at speed. Fast as you may, my lady," he requested of Rey. With his free hand, he scooped up the slower-moving Mizuko and mounted her on one broad shoulder.

Rey shook her head and sneezed, then sniffed the air and took off at a run. She moved at near top speed, wanting to make sure she didn't lose the scent or go tumbling into the Thorns as they rounded corner. Soon, Richard and even Mizuko could smell the offensive odor Rey was following. She slowed down as she approached a curve in the path, and turned to face her companions. With strange, almost human hand-like paws, she indicated she thought there were two, possibly 3 people ahead.

Richard put Mizuko down. "Can you summon your pet?" he asked Mizuko.

She shook her head. *"I need more water for it to manifest."*

He nodded, and then they all crept forward together.

Around the bend in the path, in a small clearing, they saw three changelings and the unmoving figure of Kletterman on the ground. It was obvious who the young woman referred to when she said Baba Yaga: an Ogre with olive green warty skin, black hair that resembled wires, wearing very witch-like looking robes. Crouched on the ground near Kletterman was a half man, half wolf thing, like a reject from a cheap special effects studio, and next to him was another Ogre, with vicious scars criss-crossing his body, and a length of bronze chain wrapped around his waist like a belt.

"What were you thinking," the hag said, her raspy voice full of anger. "We wanted the girl, not that feeble old man. He's not worth anything in the markets. What are we going to do with him?"

"I'm hungry," replied the wolf man.

"Be quiet, Winterfang," the hag ordered. "We're not going to eat him. Not yet. Raset, go back and get the girl."

"Why me?" the large Ogre asked. "There is no challenge in stealing that girl."

"Too much of a challenge for you, obviously," Winterfang taunted with a fang-filled grin. "Since you didn't grab her before when you had the chance."

"Enough!" the hag bellowed. "Rashet, do as you're told. Winterfang, keep watch for anything coming. This is a dangerous part of the Hedge, or have you forgotten?"

Winterfang growled.

"And don't eat the old man."

Rey clenched her jaw to keep from growling, and looked at Mizuko and Richard to see what they wanted to do.

Mizuko whispered, *"Rey, you have the wolf. Richard, take the ogre. The hag is mine. Let's go."*

Rey silently sprinted out from their hiding spot and bowled Winterfang over, tumbling along the ground as her teeth sank into his shoulder until they scraped along bone. He let out a howl of pain and surprise, throwing up a fist and striking a glancing blow off her shoulder.

Rashet spun around, uncoiling the length of chain from around his waist. "A fight. Good. Maybe it will be a challenge."

Richard said nothing, not even a war cry, as he swung his axe in a deadly arc at the ogre, fully intending to end the conflict before it began. Rashet made not a sound as he fell, the axe having nearly cleaved him in two.

Mizuko closed on Greenhag. She hadn't taken the extra moment required to add further defenses, expecting what she had to be more than sufficient. She hit the hag with her best shot, managing a shattering hit to get the villainous changeling's attention.

Greenhag staggered back a step and quickly surveyed the scene around her. She didn't like the odds, and had no real loyalty to the two changelings who worked with her, so she turned and fled, using a small amount of Glamour as she did, but with no apparent effect.

Rey continued to worry Winterfang, this time biting his arm and giving it a terrible wrench. Her teeth struck bone again with a sickening crunch. The badly bleeding wolfish man screamed and flailed at her, landing another glancing blow.

Richard saw Rey had her quarry well in... jaws. So, he took off in pursuit of Mizuko's fleeing foe and managed to catch up to her. He swung his axe and drew a vicious, bloody line across her back. "Surrender kidnapper! Surrender and live. Resist, and die."

Mizuko closed on her as well, pounding the Greenhag in the kidneys hard enough to cause serious internal damage. *"Listen to the minotaur. You cannot escape. Do not force us to bring our full power to bear upon you."*

Greenhag stumbled, and her face contorted with anger and pain, said "I surrendered once; never again, so feel my pain here at my end." Mizuko and Richard felt a surge of fae magic and then the hag exploded in a blast of bone and metal shards that tore into their flesh. The blast tore huge chunks of flesh from Richard's body, leaving him quickly bleeding out on the ground. Mizuko was picked up and thrown, her icy body shattered in places and cracked nearly everywhere.

Rey snapped at Winterfang, slicing into his flesh one more time. Winterfang struggled to get out from beneath her but the pain and blood loss was too much and he passed out. She looked over at her friends and saw them both lying on the ground, unmoving. Abandoning Winterfang, she went running over to them. Panic gripped her when she saw the condition of two of the people who meant the most in the world to her were dying.

She had no power to heal, so she frantically looked around for goblin fruit. Rey's eyes fell on a small pile of sacks and backpacks on one side of the clearing. She returned to her human form as tore over to them and ransacked them, tossing aside things she wasn't looking for until she found a small box containing what she needed.

Grabbing the container, she ran to Mizuko. "Please, let this work!" Rey took a fruit that looked like a putrid cross between a pear and an orange and, after tilting Mizuko's head up, squeezed the juice into her friend's mouth. She couldn't wait to see if it worked, and she scampered over to Richard and did the same with him, all the while whispering words of encouragement to whatever fates might be listening to let the fruit help her friends.

Mizuko coughed and gasped. Then she sighed and with a crackling of ice fortified her form. It would only be temporary, but it would get her mobile for now.

Rey sighed a bit in relief at Mizuko's use of her Contracts; that meant her friend was conscious again. The fairest turned her attention back to Richard, and she started doing first aid. "Come on, big guy. You can't leave me just yet," she said softly as she worked. "There's a couple of sides of me you really want to see, isn't there?"

Rey saw the massive bleeding slow though there was no visible reason it should have — the magical gift of the amaranthine in practice. Checking his pulse she could see it was weak but regular and his breathing, which was weak and shallow seemed clear of the deadly gurgle of blood. He was unconscious, but alive and it looked like for now, he's stay that way.

Mizuko sat up. Half her body was charred, and the rest look shattered, like a web of cracks in a broken mirror. She crackled and popped as she moved instead of the slick, smooth movement this icy form normally provided her. She looked around and spotted the two fallen would-be kidnappers, as well as the old man lying on the ground.

"I can carry Richard," Mizuko said. "Maybe drag someone, too. But not for long. My strength will soon be gone." It meant that one changeling would live as their prisoner, the other would likely die. "You must choose which of those two will die and which will live."

Rey looked between Winterfang and Rashet. There was no longer any signs of Rashet breathing, and a quick showed he had died while she was trying to save Richard. "No need to decide, as this one has died." She walked over to Winterfang. "He doesn't have very long. The bleeding has to be stopped. Give me a minute." She would not use the healing goblin fruit to save this privateer's life, but she would spend a minute or two to keep him from slipping away so he could face justice. It took a minute, but she got the bleeding stopped.

The ice nymph got up on her knees, crackling almost musically, and looked at Richard. She then carefully, gently, as if lifting a child, lifted the huge changeling up, and got her shoulders under his side, then heaved. Shards of ice rained, but she gave no other sign of discomfort as she slowly rose to her feet with Richard draped about her in a fireman's carry. His feet and arms nearly touched the ground on either side of her but she managed to balance him.

"I could come back for Winterfang," Rey said as she picked up Kletterman with great care. He moaned softly, and for a brief moment his eyes flickered open. "Everything's going to be alright, Mr. Kletterman," she said

softly. "We'll get you home."

"Left alone in the Hedge, he will be picked apart by the things that live here and smell death," Mizuko pointed out. "Lift me his foot and I will drag him a while. Maybe far enough to get him to the Gate."

Would that really be so bad, Rey thought to herself. She set Mr. Kletterman down gently, quickly gathered up the goblin fruit the privateers had, then roughly lifted Winterfang's leg so Mizuko could grab hold of it.

It seemed a much farther walk than it had been a mad dash from the Faire and through the Hedge. Mizuko tried to keep her breathing regular, but the thought of what it would be like once her body reverted to normal made her sweat icy water and her quickly tiring legs grow weaker. Still, she was alive right now and she had someone to thank for that.

"Thank you for saving my life, Rey," she told her friend softly.

"Thank you for helping me save Richard's," Rey replied, "But before we go any further, open your mouth." She shifted how she was carrying Mr. Kletterman so she could reach into the makeshift pouch she'd tied around her waist. Mizuko opened her mouth and Rey stuffed one of the healing fruits into her friend's mouth. "Eat that. It'll help." The nymph chewed and gave Rey a grateful smile.

The rest of the way, Mizuko concentrated just on being careful with Richard while not letting go of the changeling. That would be challenge enough until they returned.

"We need to get out of the faire grounds without being seen," Rey said softly before they were almost at the gate leading them back into the mortal world. "Our condition would attract too much attention. Do you think Remy would help us without it costing us too much? I can care for Richard at my place until he's back up on his feet, and you can use my door to the Hollow, but we still have to get there."

Mizuko nodded and made an affirmative grunt.

Rey used some of her Glamour to open the Gate so they could return to the mortal world. Remy was there, waiting, and the young woman was with him, now apparently sleeping. Remy took one look at Mizuko carrying Richard and quickly closed the distance between them. "Are you alright," he asked her in obvious concern.

Mizuko stepped through the portal. The Mask reasserted itself over Richard and the wolfman Mizuko still dragged, turning them into humans — badly injured ones. Mizuko remained in her ice form while she gently lowered Richard to the ground. She simply dropped the wolfman's ankle, however.

Her body was still scorched and marred where bone fragments had blasted away ice, her surface had a shattered-glass appearance. But she could not hold it any more, nor could she afford the questions her form would provoke in any case. It was just as well since the magic that powered her ice form and gave her greater stamina now faded on it's own.

The Mask settled itself over her, although Remy saw her true form in any case. The nymph was a mess. Ice transformed back into flesh, but the chunks that were gone from her torso were still gone. Exposed, broken ribs poked through her blasted and burned dress. Her arms, when she'd instinctively thrown up to protect her head when Greenhag exploded, were lacerated and torn. Without the solid strength of ice to lend her power, her broken left arm returned to being unusable. She should have been quickly bleeding out and dying but the magic of the goblin fruit had somehow stemmed the bleeding.

And now she could feel the pain of her injuries. It hit her so suddenly she swayed and she suddenly felt the need to vomit or pass out or both. "No," she told Remy. *"I am not all right."* She looked down at her self and was shocked at the severity of the injuries. The concussion she doubtless also sustained from the blast wasn't helping. *"She... she ruined my dress!"* Half-delirious tears spilled from her eyes.

"I can fix it for you, Mizuko," Rey said. She realized that she was going to have to step in and take charge of the situation. She set Mr. Kletterman carefully down in his wheelchair, which Remy must have found while she, Mizuko and Richard were gone. "Remy, we need your help."

"Of course," he answered immediately. "When you didn't return after fifteen minutes, I called a friend. He's on his way here as we speak with a van that should fit you all. Did you want to be taken to the hospital?" He wanted to take Mizuko in his arms, but was afraid if he did so, he'd only harm her more.

Rey shook her head. "No, too many questions. I have just about everything we need at my home." She squatted down next to Richard and checked his pulse before stroking his face lightly.

Remy nodded, watching her actions. "We'll get you there. I convinced the young woman to sleep, and forget what happened. She'll think she got the bump on her head when she was pushing the wheelchair around the side of this building and the chair flipped. That should explain any bumps and bruises on the old man."

He reached out and soothed a lock of Mizuko's hair. "Let's get you out of here. Once you're loaded in the van, I'll come back to get your coats." He then looked at the man Mizuko had dragged behind her. "What about him?"

Mizuko tried to sign but rapidly discovered that doesn't work with a broken arm. She whimpered in pain and desisted. *"He's all alone now,"* Mizuko voiced instead. *"I'm afraid we've killed his friends. Well, we killed one of his friends; the other exploded like a bomb when I asked her to surrender. Very... rude..."*

She realized she was babbling in a near-monotone, but couldn't stop. *"They were kidnapping people to sell them in auction. It isn't nice. I'm glad they are dead and that he's alone. We should bring him to the Winter King, don't you think, Rey? I think the Winter King will be less kind to him than we have."*

"The only reason he isn't dead," Rey replied, "is because I heard the explosion and saw you and Richard were hurt." She looked down at him and restrained the urge to kick him in the kidneys. "But yes, he needs to be handed over. But we have no place to hold him."

"I can take care of that for you," Remy said. "He will be confined for as long as you need."

Remy carried Richard with great care, and led them through darkened empty areas of the faire, avoiding the security guards, and out through a smaller side entrance to the grounds. Once Rey and Richard - and a bound and gagged Winterfang - were in the back of the SUV and Mizuko carefully buckled in, Remy retrieved their coats and they set off. After a stop at a Walmart where Remy purchased first aid supplies, they arrived at Rey's house.

Remy was surprised at the modest house Rey lived in. He'd thought she lived somewhere a bit more influential looking, and not in a lower middle class neighborhood. He carried Richard into the house and placed him in Rey's oversized bed after she pulled the sheets back and placed an old comforter down to keep keep things from being stained too badly. After ensuring Rey and Mizuko had everything they needed, he left with the promise Winterfang wouldn't be able to escape.

When the door shut behind the vampire, Rey turned to Mizuko. "Don't worry about your dress, Mizuko. I can fix it good as new. Now, here's some more fruit," she said, handing Mizuko four of the remaining fruit, "and head on into the Hollow and work on healing yourself. I can take care of Richard."

Mizuko nodded and disappeared toward her old room.

Rey went into the kitchen and got two large bowls and a pair scissors. She stopped in the bathroom to get cloths and towels and, after filling the bowls with warm water, returned to her bedroom. Looking at Richard, she laughed wryly and said "this is not what I'd imagined as the first time you were my bed." She sighed. "That was such a nice suit. I don't think it can be salvaged."

Carefully she removed his clothes, starting with the bowtie (which while a bit bloody was otherwise intact). Further inspection showed there really was no saving the suit, so she cautiously cut it off him and removed everything he was wearing except for his underwear. They were neither damaged nor bloodied, and since she didn't know how comfortable he was with nudity - or more importantly, having been undressed completely by her when unconscious - she left them on him.

Rey carefully and gently cleaned his body. Each wound was treated and bandaged as best she could, and all the while keeping up a soothing patter of words. She talked about everything and anything, about her very first encounter with a changeling, though at the time she didn't know that's what she was. Sylvia was a prostitute in a brothel, and had opened a Gate into the Hedge as a means to escape from some thugs who were trying to hurt her.

When Rey was finally finished, she was exhausted. She took her gown off and treated the bloodstains, then threw everything that was washable into the machine and got it going. After removing everything but her panties, she put on an old t-shirt and slipped into bed next to Richard. She checked his pulse and temperature, then pulled she sheets up over them to keep the chill away. Rey put her head down on the pillow, and sighed. Thinking she'd close her eyes for only a moment, she fell asleep.

Bright light reflected through the window from a powdering of snow that had fallen in the night. The sun was up, seemingly too early. Rey shifted to avoid the light and found herself looking into Richard's face. He'd turned on his less-injured side and had propped himself up on an elbow and had been watching her sleep. A slight smile tugged at the side of his mouth. Following his gaze, Rey realized that shifting around had pulled the tee down well past one shoulder.

"Good morning," she said with a smile of her own. She made no effort to cover herself up. Having lived with werewolves for a couple of years, plus the time of her durance, she has no problem with casual nudity. "How are you feeling?"

"Like I was blown up, but since I hurt like hell I guess that means I'm alive," he replied. "How'd I get here?"

"Mizuko carried you out of the Hedge," Rey said, "after I was able to get you to swallow the juice of an amaranthine and that, along with some first aid, got the bleeding stopped and you stabilized. Remy helped us get out of the faire grounds unseen and drove us here." Her eyes scanned the bandages, looking for signs of bleeding. "Once we'd gotten you into bed, I made sure your wounds were clean and free of debris, then bandaged you up." She shifted in bed, rolling onto her side so she was facing him, a move that exposed a bit more of her figure. "I've got some more goblin fruit that will help heal you up a bit more, including another amaranthine."

He was frankly surprised he was still alive. He wasn't sure he should be. "I could use any healing fruit you have to spare," he admitted. He turned onto his back and laid gingerly back onto the bed.

"I'll be right back." She rolled over and sat in a single movement and walked out of the bedroom, revealing the other garment she wore was a black lace thong. Rey returned a moment later with the fruit in a small bowl and some napkins. Rejoining him on the bed she asked, "Would you like me to get some pillows to prop you up a bit?"

"No need to make such a fuss," Richard assured her. "I've been injured before." He ate the fruit slowly, taking time so they could work their magic. In time, he inquired, "Did the old man survive?"

"He did," Rey answered. "He had little more than bumps and bruises." She told him the cover story Remy had come up with. "He should be okay." She wanted to ask Richard if he wanted something to drink, but refrained, not wanting to be accused of fussing over him. She knew from experience how difficult and uncomfortable it sometimes was to eat lying down. "I'm going to get dressed before my goosebumps get goosebumps."

She slid out of bed, pulling her shirt over her head as she did so, removing her thong immediately afterward and tossing both into the dirty clothes hamper in the corner. Rey knew that Richard could see her, but it didn't bother her.

When she caught a glimpse of him through the mirror on her dresser, she noticed he was quietly watching her with a small smile on his face.

Rey fought off the urge to act provocatively, to flaunt her body to arouse him. She'd promised both him and herself she wouldn't push, so she continued to act as normal. She took out a pair of matching bra and thong and taking a few steps back from the dresser to give herself some room to put them on - thong first, followed by bra, knowing Richard could see every inch of her from the top of her head to just above her knees reflected in the mirror. "Let's see," she murmured. "What to wear. Pants or skirt." She pulled a pair of jeans out of the bottom drawer and slipped them on. She matched it with a stretch long sleeve shirt that matched her eyes in her fae mien. Finally, she grabbed a pair of socks and climbed up onto the bed to put them on.

Once fully dressed, she rolled onto her side facing him and smiled. "Feeling any better?" she asked. She was referring to the healing properties of the fruit, but she was interested in anything he might say.

"Quite a lot. The rest will just take time, I think," he told her. His eyes never left her as he continued, "Thanks for looking after me."

She was surprised at his choice of words. He always seemed so careful about what he said, and she knew he'd never say something unless he meant it. "You're welcome," was the only response she could think of. She leaned in to give him a gentle kiss and she found his hands wrapped around her in a gentle, warm embrace. His lips found hers and they lost themselves in the moment.

When the kiss came to an end, Rey stayed where she was, doing her best to support herself so as not to put pressure on Richard and aggravate any injuries that hadn't been healed by the fruit. "What would you like to do now?" Her words were as much a question as an invitation. She knew what she wanted, for her entire body was tingling.

He touched her face gently. What came out of his mouth was, "What I'd like to do is probably both unwise and ungentlemanly." But what was in his eyes was more like, "Take a fistful of Tylenol and then make love to you."

"Perhaps," Rey replied, "if it's something we both want, is it really wrong?" She wanted to offer to do all the work, to let her make love to him and be on top to make it easier for him, but he was the only one who could decide how much pain he was willing to endure. Now that the opportunity was here, that he'd brought up the subject, her arousal and libido spiked, and she was pretty sure he could smell it.

"Oh, if we were truly proper then I suppose this right here is improper outside of marriage. But I hear there is such a thing as having so much respect for the object of one's affection that you never take a chance." He smiled and his eyes sparkled. "Maybe, since we are in agreement, we might take a chance. I still maintain it's unwise due to my recently being exploded, but at least we have an excuse then if, ah, it doesn't work out?"

"Sometimes caution does need to be thrown to the wind. Now, I must leave you for just a moment." Rey slipped out of his arms and returned from the bathroom with a glass of water and a bottle of painkillers. Without a word, she placed them on the nightstand next, then looked him over. "I think I'm a bit overdressed, don't you?" She pulled her shirt over her head and tossed it onto the nearby chair. The rest of her clothes followed and then she slid back into the bed.

Rey spent but a drop of her Glamour and her size shifted, becoming larger and almost matching his height, and her curves had grown proportionately. She leaned down to kiss him, her hair falling around them like a fragrant veil, and her breasts pressed lightly against his broad chest as their lips met. Next time they could explore each other in their natural sizes; tonight, Richard's ease was more important.

He reached up and explored her body with his hands. "You are very talented," he said, appreciating her ability to change form and size. A lot of tension seemed to ease away from him and he paused long enough to take the pills and water. He hoped they kicked in quickly.

"I know a few useful tricks." Her nipples hardened as his hands played with her breasts and she sighed with pleasure. She ran her hands lightly over his chest, gently exploring without putting too much pressure on the bandages, content to touch and be touched until he was ready for more. She felt Richard slowly relax as she continued. He was clearly hindered by the serious injuries he nursed and could not move the way he wished, but he tried nonetheless.

"Be at ease," she said as she leaned down and kissed him. It was slow, deep, and full of promise. "Let me love you tonight. There will be other times, and when you are healed, we can enjoy each other more fully." He nodded and was still.

She kissed him again, then slid a leg over him so she knelt astride his hips. Rey pressed kisses along the strong line of his jaw. Every action was slow and tender, aimed to both please and relax him. In the back of her mind, she noted she'd never been like this before, with either Grey or Chase. That little voice wanted to ponder what it meant, but she told it to shush and ignored it. Slowly she explored her way down his chest with her mouth and hands, burning every reaction into her mind for future reference, until she reached the waistband of his underwear.

Rey looked up the length of his body, her eyes heavy with love and desire as she traced the elastic with her fingertips. "May I?" she asked. He nodded slowly, encouraging her to continue. Carefully, almost with reverence, she removed the garment and watched as his erection sprang free. He was large, perhaps even larger than Grey, but she was not worried. She knew she would be able to accommodate him in her normal size, but that would be an adventure for another time.

She drew his underwear down his legs and set it aside before returning to him. "Tell me when you wish me to stop and want to be in me." Rey took him in her hands and explored him. She cupped his sack and massaged him as her other hand stroked him. After a while, satisfied he was ready, she looked up at his face with a wicked little smile before running her tongue along his shaft from base to tip and taking him in her mouth.

Rey paid homage to that most masculine part of him, adoring him with her tongue and varying degrees of suction. Each time she took him deeper until she deep throated him easily, having lost her gag reflex long ago. She quickly grew to read his body language, and knew he was enjoying himself. Changeling or not, there were reactions that all men shared, and Rey knew how to please a man, as well as when he was on the edge.

It took him some time to get to that point, and Rey could guess the lingering pain of his injuries held him back somewhat. But not enough for him to want to stop. A nod from him was all the affirmation she needed to be sure he was ready to sheath himself inside her. Lithe like a cat, she moved into position, her knees on

either side of him and, with a gentle touch, guided him to her entrance. Her eyes fixed on his, she slowly lowered herself onto him. The feel of him inside her made Rey shudder with delight and she gasped. Inch by inch she took him in, and she didn't try to hide any of the pleasure she was experiencing.

Once she'd taken him all, Rey sat there motionless, allowing both of them time to become accustomed to how well they fit together. She didn't remain still for long. Eyes still focused on his, she began to rock. It was a slow, deliberate movement, maximizing friction while promoting pleasure. She set the pace, a rhythm they could maintain indefinitely. From the look in his eyes, Rey knew he'd never experienced this kind of blissful experience with another woman. His eyes drank in her form but always returned to what he liked best; her own beautiful face.

The knowledge made Rey feel both powerful and special. She gradually picked up the pace, and changed the angle at which she was moving, increasing the friction and the pleasure they both felt. Watching his face carefully, she made adjustments to bolster the pleasure he experienced. She was determined to make this first time memorable, something planted deep in their minds to be cherished for all time.

She felt the pressure in her rising, her heart racing and her breathing shallow. Rey knew Richard was feeling it too, and she felt his hips shifting under her of their volition, instinctively matching her move for move. She was so close, but she held back, needing to know he'd reached the pinnacle and flown over it with her. Little sounds of need escaped her lips and she fought the urge to move frantically, to rush to the finish line. Her face flushed and lips parted, she couldn't drag her eyes away from his. "So close," she whispered, unaware she was speaking. Her movements became more forceful, and soon she was trembling with the effort to wait so they achieved nirvana together. She realized his hands were on her hips, encouraging her motion. His face became intense and his eyes closed as she saw him strain to hold out to the last possible moment.

"Now," she urged them both. "Now..." Her words were lost as she gave voice to the explosion of ecstasy that shook her body. When it was finally over, and little aftershocks trembled through her, she opened her eyes to look down at the man beneath her. The softness in the big warrior's eyes showed the warmth of his appreciation and affection. He drew her down next to him so that she was against his uninjured side.

Rey left her leg half-tangled with his as she molded her body to his and rested her hand over his heart. She relaxed and enjoyed the simple joy of their closeness and when she looked at him, her face was, perhaps for the first time while she was awake, open and unguarded. "Snuggle time?" she asked with a smile and sigh of contentment.

In answer, he nodded and wrapped her in his arms. "I know it is magic and it is how these things work for us, but to me it is still amazing to watch your thorns shift, your brambles part for me. These things you don't consciously control, I think, and told me as much about your feelings as anything you have said and done. I'm at peace here," he told her. "And for a warrior, that is a rare feeling."

"A friend once told me that sometimes the mate you need is not the one that brings out the great, perhaps violent passions, but the one who brings you peace." Rey caressed his face with a loving hand. "I am very glad we found each other."

Mizuko had carefully removed her dress (which was hellishly difficult with only one good arm) and then found an old business suit that Rey had bought her what seemed like ages ago now. It wasn't much fun pulling that on either. She'd settled for pulling on the skirt, draping a suit coat over her bare shoulders, and then rolling up a few other needful things into a bundle she stuck under her good arm. Then she activated the Gate to the motley hollow and stepped through.

It felt very much like returning home after a long absence, though she was sure she had visited less than a

week ago. She picked her way cautiously toward the spring as the resident sprite chattered happily away, oblivious to Mizuko's discomfort. Once she'd settled onto her favorite, large stone at the water's edge, Mizuko asked the sprite to fetch her something to eat. She didn't intend to eat, but it gave the sprite something to do other than pester Mizuko.

With the little fairy out of her hair, Mizuko sat down and began to slowly eat the fruit that Rey had given her. Magic went to work on her, too, and soon she found herself able to think more clearly. Her head stopped hurting and most of the superficial wounds had healed over perfectly. The break in her arm and her ribs still required mending and she still hurt inside. But it felt like everything was on the mend. She hoped to be right in a few days.

Clarity allowed her some time to think. The changelings they'd encountered had been talking about taking the people they took on the markets. To her, that sounded like privateers. Changeling like that only cared about what kind of profit they could make. The biggest trade was trafficking in people — a faerie slave trade. The hag had seemed rather particular about the target, though. Granted, the old man might not fetch as much as a healthy young woman. But why that particular young woman? Why hadn't the hag ordered him to take any young women he could find? There must be some special quality to her that Mizuko did not see herself. It might be that the wolfman changeling might have an answer for that question.

Also of immediate concern was Richard. The Autumn Queen would be without her Paladin for at least a while. Several days, maybe a week. Veridia had to be told as soon as possible and somehow, Mizuko was pretty sure Rey wasn't thinking about that. That was one big weakness Mizuko knew Rey had; she would allow herself to become distracted to the point of ignoring others when she had a man around.

After that, the wolfman had to be dealt with. Depending on what magic he possessed, it was entirely possible he could escape whatever Remy did to security him. Perhaps they should bring him to the Winter King and she was sure they would. But might it not be valuable to Veridia for him to be brought to her first?

The sprite showed up with a collection of goblin tubers she had dug up, washed, and then peeled very carefully. Mizuko stood up, thanked her and told the little faerie she should enjoy the meal and share it with Ollie. She carefully put on her clothes more properly, and then made a sling of a spare shirt to take some pressure off those mending bones in her arm. Then she decided she needed to make some calls.

She exited the hollow by going back to Rey's home. The house was utterly silent by then, and Mizuko thought that everyone must be asleep by now. With a sigh she realized that in all the excitement she completely lost track of her purse. Her brass knuckles and all those condoms were likely destined to find a new home in somebody's garbage. Luckily, the cell phone Remy had given her had been left in her coat pocket, not her purse. It was there on the guest bed where Mizuko had left it before heading to the Hollow.

She made the call, and more or less got the fifth degree from Veridia. The Queen wanted every detail and Mizuko gave it with one, notable exception. She told the Queen that Remy was ensorcelled, which was true, but she made no mention that he was a vampire. Then Mizuko asked her Queen if she wanted her to bring the privateer now, before he was brought to the Winter King, but she was given the go-ahead to turn him over to Less.

Mizuko left the house after making a mental note to call Rey in the morning and catch her up to events. She caught a bus at the nearest bus stop and wound her way back home. She found her roommate asleep on the couch with the TV and lights still on. Amber woke up and one look at Mizuko brought her immediate concern. Mizuko gave her the cliff notes version of the evening while Amber listened with a worried expression. She also mentioned Remy's offer of finding a better place for them to live. The moment Amber realized she would be going with Mizuko, Amber was enthusiastic about the idea.

Then Mizuko called Remy. He answered the phone after the third ring. "What can I do for you, *ma petite*?" His voice was low, and she couldn't help but hear the innuendo of his words.

"Ah," she said, momentarily thrown off by his response. "It's me," she said unnecessarily. "I would like to take the prisoner to the Winter King tomorrow night, if that can be arranged."

"That can be done," he replied. "Do you want him conscious or unconscious?"

"Unconscious is fine," Mizuko said.

"I also have the answer to your question about whether my roommate would be okay with moving. Amber said a number of things that sounded like a firm yes to me." Mizuko wasn't a proud person, but if she was, she could have prided herself on a gift for understatement with that remark.

There was a pause on the other end for a split second. "Very good. Would you be able to view apartments the evening after tomorrow?"

"Yes." Then it was her turn to pause. "Is this okay? I'm not sure how something like this will be paid."

"I have a pretty good idea of what you've been paying in rent," Remy said, "The places I will show you will be in that range. I will sign the lease as a guarantor, giving the owner of the building the knowledge they'll get their money every month. I think that's probably the reason why you were so limited in what you find. Please let me do this for you. You'll still need to make the payments every month on your own, so my being the guarantor is the best way to get you a nicer place."

"That was all you wanted?" Mizuko sounded surprised. "To just put your name on a paper?"

"I want much, much more," Remy said, "but I know you are trying to make it on your own, so I did not think you'd be willing for me to pay part or all of the rent to get you into a much nicer apartment."

"You are usually right," Mizuko said. "But in this case I meant what I said literally. Wherever you want. If that means a little bit nicer place that Amber and I can afford on our own, I'm fine with that. If it's some place you'd had in mind that you had wanted to provide instead, that's good too."

"I had to do some thinking about this," Mizuko explained, "and I realized that what was expected of me wasn't that I find some way to scratch out a living and put a roof over my head. It was to be a part of this world, to interact here and live as a human being would live, not isolate myself or retreat to fae lands. How I did that isn't so important. So, if it pleases you for me to live somewhere else then I want to do that as an expression of my appreciation for you."

"There are a few places I had in mind," Remy admitted. "One of them is in walking distance of Corazon. It's a nice building, with 24 hour security. Many of the apartments have over-sized or jacuzzi tubs."

"It does sound nice. In two nights then?"

"Yes. Will Amber be with you?"

"She can be if you like," Mizuko said.

"You both will be living there," he replied, "it's only right she be there to have some input into the decision."

"Yes," Mizuko agreed. "I think she'll come with then. It might also be useful to have her there as someone who is interested in something more than tub size."

Remy chuckled. "I'll pick you and Amber up at 6:30, then."

"I look forward to it," Mizuko replied.

After Mizuko had had a chance to catch a few hours of sleep, she called Rey's phone and left a message letting her friend know that she had rested at the Hollow a short while, then had gone home. She also let Rey know that Winterfang would be taken care of and that there were no loose ends to worry about.

The next night, Remy had Winterfang ready for pickup just as promised. The unconscious changeling had likely been in a coma-like condition for the entire previous day and still looked pretty chewed up. Mizuko collected him, having previously made arrangement with the former Dusk changeling, Claire. They delivered him to the Winter King's court where she described Winterfang's crimes as a privateer that captured mortals in order to sell them at goblin markets. She informed the King that his companions had been killed or committed suicide during the capture and that as far as she knew, there were no other members of his band. After that, it was left to the Winter King's judgment what might be done with Winterfang.

By the following night, Mizuko was already recovered from her injuries. Her fae metabolism, fortified by just a single common goblin fruit the previous day as well as this day, regenerated even the broken bones and internal injuries she'd sustained during the hag's detonation. Though Amber avoided pestering Mizuko about it, the nymph's recovery seemed nothing short of miraculous.

Fortunately, the young lady had something equally distracting and interesting to think about. To Amber, Mizuko's boyfriend was handsome and looked quite rich. Being included in Mizuko's "good fortune" thrilled her and she'd been asking a lot of questions, which Mizuko answered as well as she could. The nymph couldn't help being a little concerned for Amber. While Amber had taken a pledge with Mizuko a while ago and had become ensorcelled and somewhat introduced to Mizuko's world, Amber didn't know that Remy was a vampire. The supernatural world was still a vast unknown to Amber. In truth, it was still mostly unknown even to Mizuko.

Mizuko disliked endangering her teenage friend even this much. Amber was her only remaining mortal friend and she'd come to depend on Amber as someone she could talk to about mundane things. Mizuko needed her but could not avoid exposing Amber to her world and so she had to shoulder the responsibility of watching out for Amber. Mizuko wasn't entirely sure how she might be able to do that yet.

When 6:30 pm arrived, Mizuko made sure that both she and Amber were ready and waiting out front of the apartment building.

A plain black sedan pulled up in front of the building. When it came to a stop, the back door opened and Remy stepped out. He was wearing a suit, as always, looking elegant and sophisticated. "Good evening," he said, bowing slightly to Amber before taking Mizuko's hand. Locking eyes with hers, he kissed her hand in Old World fashion.

Mizuko smiled, feeling the refreshing glamour wash over her. Today it was needed as well. She hadn't yet fully recovered from the magic she'd spent two nights ago.

"Hiya!" said Amber, holding her hand out to shake.

Without taking her eyes off Remy, Mizuko murmured, "*Amber. Gum.*"

Amber looked a little miffed, but dug a wrapper out of her purse and stuffed the gum she'd been chewing into it, then stowed it away. "Ah, sorry," Amber in a more subdued tone.

Remy chose to ignore the girl's little gaff and, upon releasing Mizuko's hand, took Amber's in a firm grasp and shook it. "Are you looking forward to looking at new apartments?"

Amber beamed a flirtatious smile at him. "Yeah! I'm always up for something new."

"Perhaps, then," Remy replied, "you may find one to your liking." He took a step to the side and opened the

front passenger door. "Miss Amber," he said with a little bow and a small, sweeping gesture inviting her to take a seat.

Once Amber was in her seat, he handed Mizuko into the back seat, then slid in beside her. The car pulled away from the curb, Remy said, "We'll be taking a look at the Hargrave Gate building. It's the one closest to Corazon, a little less than a mile away."

Mizuko nodded. She was listening but mostly her attention was on how close he was to her. After a minute or so, she attempted a little small talk. "How are your friends doing? Carson and was it Wilson and... Margaret?"

"They are doing well," Remy replied. "I believe Carson wishes to speak with you, and ask your advice."

"Is it about Rey again?" she signed

Remy laughed softly. "Yes, but not in the way you mean. He feels the need to apologize for something, and wants to be able to do it without her or Marie giving him the Evil Eye when he gets within so much as a hundred yards of her."

"Oh. Well then I suggest he call her. That way he won't know if she gives him the evil eyes," Mizuko signed seriously. "She's at the casino a lot, so he might reach her there easily enough. If it has something to do with Marie, then I'd suggest he doesn't have anything to apologize for. What he does with Marie is hers and his business."

"He won't tell me what happened, but whatever it is, it happened the night Rey was kidnapped." He glanced at Amber for a moment. "And he has tried to approach her at the casino, but she had him ejected and banned from the building indefinitely."

Mizuko looked puzzled. "That is very strange," she signed. "I'm not sure what I can say about that. I wasn't there, as I'm sure you're more aware of than I, and I know no more about it than you do. If he managed to both help rescue her and also make her angry enough to get him thrown out of the casino, then I'm at a loss as to what I could possibly suggest him do."

"I will let him know," Remy said. "He is getting rather frustrated with this, and it's rather amusing to watch. I don't think any woman has given him as much trouble as she has. I believe he's taking it very personally, almost as a point of personal honor, to get her forgiveness."

Mizuko smiled slightly, then signed, "I would almost feel sorry for him, but then he tends to do this sort of thing to himself, doesn't he? I did warn him not to pursue her. If that's what he did anyway and got burned for it, then I have no sympathy at all for his situation."

"Perhaps. He can be impulsive," Remy added. "But whatever happened, it disturbed him greatly, and he wishes to make amends. He may just have to wait a while for Miss Lafitte's temper to cool."

Mizuko nodded agreement.

A short while later, the car pulled into the parking lot of a large, modest-looking apartment building. The driver got out and walked around to open the door for Amber, while Remy got himself and Mizuko on their feet. "This is the Hargrave Gate building. It has a number of amenities." He went on to give a rather impressive list of them. Mizuko listened but mostly tried to pay attention to the kinds of things that Remy seemed to want to point out while she also gauged Amber's reaction.

His emphasis appeared to be on the safety and comfort. As they approached the front door, Mizuko felt something niggling at her senses, one she associated with an entrance into the Hedge. She looked around,

trying to identify the source and kept doing that as they proceeded, in hopes of stumbling by it. The presence of a Hedge Gate could be a huge bonus. The fact that it could also be a deadly tragedy waiting to happen depending on who might use it weighed slightly less on her mind than the potential use she might find for it.

By the time they reached the front doors, Mizuko had failed to locate the gate, and they were greeted by a uniformed doorman. He let them into the building and Remy escorted Mizuko and Amber to the security desk. He spoke with the guard, and a few moments later, an elderly man in a nice grey suit stepped out of the elevator. "Mister Deprez? Good evening. I'm Leonard Fiskel, the manager of the building." He looked at Mizuko and Amber and smiled at them, his sharp eyes taking in everything about them.

Mizuko smiled at the man and signed something. Amber picked up on it and told Mr. Fiskel, "She says she's pleased to meet you. Me too," Amber added with a smile of her own.

Fiskel smiled. "It is indeed a pleasure to meet you, Miss...."

"Just Amber," said the red-headed girl brightly. "No 'miss' please. You can call her Miss Naia, though." Amber grinned while Mizuko rolled her eyes but smiled.

"A pleasure to meet you Amber, Miss Naia." He nodded pleasantly to both women. "If you'll come with me, I'll take you to the apartment you're interested in. It's on the eleventh floor." He walked to the elevator and when it opened, waited for the others to enter first before following them. "It's one of our better apartments, and it was refurbished after the last tenant moved out. Three bedrooms, and two bathrooms - one attached to the master bedroom. It is furnished, but if you prefer your own things, we'll move out what's there before you move in, should you decide to come live with us."

Mizuko raised an eyebrow at the number of bedrooms and wondered if it meant something. The fact it was furnished was interesting as well and she stole a look at Remy when the building manager mentioned it. Remy nodded, a calm expression on his face giving away nothing.

The elevator door opened again to reveal a tastefully decorated, if somewhat neutral, hallway. "This way," Fiskel said, and escorted them down the hall to the last door on the left-hand side. "This is it." He retrieved a keyring from his pocket and opened the door, then stood back to allow them to enter ahead of him.

Amber bounded inside, followed by Mizuko. They walked past the coat stand, closet and large mirror near the entrance to find the soft, black leather living room set and the huge flatscreen TV that adorned a wall. A step divided the sunken living area from the dining area and adjacent spacious kitchen already stocked with the usual appliances, plus neatly hung handy pans and other kitchenware, a knife block, and a central cutting table was blessed with a marble surface. A short hall led to the bedroom and a bath on this level, which Amber quickly explored. Beyond the dining area there were huge windows with steel shutters (currently open to allow an early evening view of Santa Fe) and the sliding glass door allowed access to a wide balcony.

Winding stairs, set off by a decorative, flowing water wall led up to the next level. Mizuko was captivated by the translucent glass panel that continuously ran water over it, cycled from a trough at the base, until Amber dragged her up to the next level. There the remaining room and master suite shared space. The master suite was huge, nearly as big as the entire dining and living area below it. It contained a king-sized bed complete with tall, iron backboard. It was the only thing in the entire apartment that made Mizuko frown. She clearly did not like the wrought-iron look. But even that frown was short-lived as she proceeded to see the huge tub. It actually had steps down and at its deepest part, the water would be up to her chin. An array of water nozzles were meant to direct and massage every position possible in it, from the seats to the deepest part of the tub.

Amber verbalized what Mizuko could not. "Holy shi--! Cow! Holy cow! Lookit the tub, 'Zuko!" Amber put a foot up on the broad step that surrounded the tub and peered down.

Mizuko turned to Remy while Amber bounded off toward the remaining bedroom. "I like it very much," she signed. "Not that horrible, dangerous thing attached to the bed, but everything else is perfect."

"We can have that removed and replaced with something else," Remy signed back. "Did you want to go look at the other apartments, or shall I ask for the lease papers?" He smiled at her.

A smile spread across Mizuko's lips, but then Amber intervened. "Um, I need to have a word with Mizuko. In private. If it's okay?"

"Of course," Remy said.

Amber grabbed Mizuko's hand and dragged her into the bathroom, then closed the door. Mizuko stared at her, wondering what this was about.

Amber signed so they wouldn't be overheard. "This place is really awesome." Mizuko agreed with a nod and a smile. She was thinking about the tub again.

"But isn't it a little too awesome?" Amber asked. That elicited a puzzled look. "I mean, this has to be really, really expensive, something we'd never be able to afford on our own."

Mizuko waited patiently for Amber to explain. Amber sighed. "You can really be naive, you know that? Guys don't just buy an apartment for their girlfriend and then don't expect anything. They sure as hell don't put up their girlfriends in the apartment equivalent of a mansion and not expect something in return. So what is it? What do you have to do for all this?"

Mizuko still looked blank. "He just wants to see me in a better place," she signed.

Amber slapped her own forehead. "Right," she signed back. "Look, you guys don't seem to date a whole lot. I mean, he isn't over all the time, you guys are not doing stuff together most nights of the week, things I would expect if you were dating seriously. So what is it?"

Mizuko thought about that. They'd done a couple dates, and they'd had very good sex on several occasions; good enough that the thought of the last time sent a thrill through her even a month later. But she really didn't have an answer for Amber. She shrugged. "Maybe I'll find out."

"Yeah, and maybe he just wants for sex. Like a mistress he keeps in an ivory tower and visits when he wants it."

Mizuko didn't see a downside to that and Amber guessed that was the case from the mildly puzzled and amused look on her face. Amber sighed then signed, "Okay. This is futile, isn't it? Fine. I'm with you Mizuko — this is an awesome place. And when he breaks your heart and tosses us back on the street I'll be your shoulder to cry on, but you can't say I didn't warn you."

When Mizuko and Amber returned to Remy and Leonard Fiskel, Mizuko smiled. She signed, "I don't think we need to look at other apartments. When can I move in?"

Remy conferred with Mr. Fiskel. "You can move in at the end of the week, if you like," Remy announced.

Mizuko slipped an arm around Remy's waist, then lifted up on her toes to give him a kiss on the cheek.