

*Previously, at Mizuko's apartment...*

Mizuko held up the large envelop that had her name written in silvery script on the front. As she shifted on the couch, she felt Amber put her chin on her shoulder.

"Hey whats that? An invitation?" Amber asked brightly.

Mizuko nodded, then broke the seal and opened the envelope. Inside was a beautiful card decorated with snowflakes on a black background.

"Pink!" Amber smiled. She was referring to the color of the flakes imprinted on the card. "What's it for?"

Mizuko read it, then let Amber see as well. "A Winter Formal?" There was excitement in her voice. "And you can bring a guest! Can we go Mizuko?"

The ice nymph hesitated. The date was set for the 14th of February. Might Remy ask her to do something? But she hadn't heard from him, and the date for the Winter Formal was very soon.

"Please? You never take me anywhere, but yet we do the pledge thing every month," Amber pointed out.

Well, the nymph thought, perhaps Annabeth Milogie was right. Perhaps sitting around and waiting for Remy to show up for one of his rare visits was beneath her. Maybe she was right and it was an unhealthy obsession to put the rest of her life on hold for him. If she decided to go to the Winter Formal on Valentines, what's the worst that would happen? Miss a date with Remy that he hadn't asked of her anyway? In any case, the odds were that she would just be sitting here alone again, that he would never call that night.

So Mizuko nodded and Amber bounded up off the couch talking excitedly about costumes and her first ever real faerie ball.

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*February 14th, 2012*

Mizuko's and Amber's apartment was still in a shambles from the destruction visited upon it during their attempts to rid the place of brain-eating slugs. Even if they had appropriate Masquerade Ball wear, it would surely need cleaning and repair. So, they opted to go looking for what they needed.

This turned out to be something of a city-spanning scavenger hunt/crime spree since between the two of them, they only had enough money to afford a couple pairs of shoes, which they did actually purchase. The rest was creatively managed. Amber discovered that while Mizuko had no skill in deception, five-fingering items, or really theft of any sort, she was amazingly distracting. Mizuko would ask for assistance to find some basic things. Glitter for instance, or glue, a minor article of clothing perhaps, and soon she'd have the attention of nearly everyone in the store. The combination of her unusual beauty and her mystical voice proved honey to the flies of mortality.

While Mizuko managed to purchase needed, but very inexpensive items, Amber shoplifted. By the end of the day they had everything they needed for the Winter Formal. They adorned themselves with new dresses (a white and black ball gown for Amber was unusual in that it stopped at her knees, while Mizuko's was a longer dress in with a strapless red top and flowing, black gown). They opted for blank masks, which they decorated themselves with glitter using pictures Mardi Gras costumes as a guide, then adding a thematic heart or two. They were worn, rather than held up to the face since they realized they would soon grow tired of holding a mask on a stick all night. Between Amber's eye for fashion and Mizuko's willingness to try just about anything, they managed to put together unique, pleasing costumes despite the eclectic sources.

They were pleased enough with their adventures for the day they didn't even mind having to take a bus

while in costume. They made a game of counting the looks they got.

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Less smiled to himself as he watched one of the Bleak Seal runners disappear through a hole in the trainyard fence. She had decided to move through the Hedge on her errand. He returned to the lost and found office and ran one of the pair of scarves through his fingers. A beautiful weave of red and gold, it would be eye-catching in the sea of red, white and black that was the dress-code for the Winter Formal. He tried to imagine Viscissitude receiving the package containing the third scarf of the set, complete with anonymous Valentine of a secret admirer. Would she be thrilled by the mystery? Would she be wary of treachery? Would she immediately wrap it around her and rush to the mirror to see how it reflected the light as it draped across her skin? Would she ball it up, stuff it back into the box, and kick it into the corner? Time would tell. Less wrapped his own copy into a tight package and slipped it into a pocket.

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Less pondered his outfit for the Winter Formal. He had long been storing his clothing over the years in a special room of the Bleak Seal's Hollow. You never knew when you would need some sort of attire to enable you to blend in somewhere. He wasn't sure how this particular hall had ended up in the Hedge. Perhaps at one time it had been someone's workshop, but it was certain that it had been long forgotten and overgrown by the time he had come upon it. It was even possible that some sort of seismic event had dropped a shopping mall through a Faerie Gate. The original tiled floor was cracked and littered with loose debris. The walls were crumbling and, in some cases, leaning over at considerable angles. The arched roof high above was glassed in but only let in a small amount of light through the vines and leaves that covered the panes. The intervening distance hung with fine dust that made the cobwebs, ducting and hanging wires seem mysterious and dangerous when they were really just useless and sad. The floor space was full of partially assembled storefront mannequins and wheeled clothing racks. Less had arranged them into crooked aisles which he now patrolled, looking for a specific item of his past.

"Ah, finally!" he exclaimed as he pulled out a triangle-check patterned suit jacket. It was chiefly red but had horizontal stripes of interlocking black and white triangles. It was the peak of fashion in around 1970 and was perfect for the colour theme! The hanger also contained the black bow tie and white trousers that went with the ensemble. When he moved it, he raised a cloud of dust that sent him into a fit of sneezing and decided that he would have to have it cleaned. He also selected a few other outfits and added them to his bundle - he may have call for a costume change or two during the course of the evening.



*Less' outfit for the Winter Formal, but with red instead of blue.*

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Mizuko led Amber on a wintry path up Iron Mountain until they arrived at what appeared to be a closed mine entrance. By the tracks in the damp snow, many others had already traveled this way. The sun had already set behind the mountain, sheltering the party-goers in a cloak of shadow. Since they couldn't see very far, it lent a feeling of privacy.

Amber had never been to this part of the mountain, much less at a fae party. She chattered away, full of questions and excited remarks. Mizuko answered rarely, encouraging Amber to wait and see since anything she might say about it would pale in comparison to the real event. Amber was awed when Mizuko pulled aside the veil of reality and escorted her friend into the mine. They found themselves walking through the halls of the Duchy's grand Hollow with the mine tunnels only a dimly seen shadow.

Amber grew silent as she stared around her. Mizuko led her to the coat check, and then they found their way to a table where a pair of changelings were selling white roses that would in fact grant them the illusion of a fae seeming and kith.

Amber insisted on a Fairest Darkling, which was of course impossible. What she finally agreed to take was the seeming of a darkling but with a kith like that of a Muse. Her combination ended up looking much like a pale, possibly undead version of herself but with unearthly, inspiring beauty slightly marred by the inclusion of sharp, white fangs and roughly pointed ears.

Mizuko experimentally chose to be a Hag — an ogre witchtooth. Though she had intended a frightening and horrifying result at befitted a member of Autumn, what she ended up with was a striking, amber and grey skinned hag of long, shapely body and disturbingly attractive face despite the tusks and piercing yellow eyes.

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Less pushed his mop of hair across his brow as he welcomed Mizuko and Amber to Iron Mountain. He wore his spectacular suit but had not yet changed into his costume for the evening. People expected to see the Winter King and so he stood just beyond the registration booth, under his crown, and received the guests. Once most of the guests had arrived, he would use the generous gifts of Ishtar to power the transformation of his features and fae mein and join in on the fun. Of course, to him the fun was in the intrigue and loose lips that the masquerade promised.

"It is a pleasure to welcome you Amber," said Less giving her the obligatory chaste hug. "We do not receive many mortals in these halls so you are a special guest tonight." He took a long diaphanous red and gold scarf out of his pocket: the twin of the scarf he had sent to Vicissitude. "Please accept this gift to help you enjoy the event."

The faux darkling that was now Amber seemed delights. She'd been all eyes, looking around at all the strange and wonderful sights, but in Less's presence, she'd made a good attempt to focus. Less noted the gift drew her attention from what must be a fascinating experience for her. "Thank you! Um, m'lord?" Mizuko nudged her and signed something in ASL and Amber grinned sheepishly. "Your highness, I mean."

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### *The Date Auction*

Mizuko and Amber had mingled around the floor of the great hall. Mizuko had insisted that Amber remain by her side, but the teenager had managed to disappear from Mizuko's sight when Mizuko stopped to pick up a glass of wine. When Amber reappeared she was practically flushed with excitement.

"Look Mizuko! I got a ticket for the Date Auction!" She said, waving the ticket in front of Mizuko.

Mizuko caught it and pulled it from her hand, then stuck it down the front of her dress so she could scold Amber. She signed, "Oh no you don't! An auction? You have no idea what kind of trouble you could get into with something like this. What if some huge ogre won you? You'd be stuck with him all night and I haven't any idea how you'd even make it home. It's too dangerous."

Amber pouted. "But I thought it would be fun."

"Too much fun. You'll have enough 'fun' when the dancing starts anyway. Where did you get this? I'm going to put it back."

Amber sighed and signed, "Over there. There's a little table set up and a man with butterfly wings is just giving them away."

Mizuko looked puzzled at that, so Amber explained, "See, they call the number and you go up on the stage. People bid on you and you get to be the date of the highest bidder. It's for a good cause — earnings are split between the Winter Court and Duchy charities like helping newly arrived changelings find a home."

Mizuko patted Amber's arm, then signed, "Your heart's in the right place Amber, but this is just not something I'm comfortable with you doing. I'm going to hand in the number."

As they threaded their way through the crowd toward the auctioneer's table, they heard a cry of "Sold! Tonight is your lucky night, sir! You have a date with the charming Dryad of Winter Trees!" A lady dressed in a white gown wearing a sparkling white and silver mask was helped down off the wooden box and let to her suitor for the evening.

Mizuko hurried her steps as she saw the auctioneer reach into a bin to pull the next number for the Date Night auction and pulled out the ticket she held.

"Number 7! Lucky number 7!" the auctioneer called as he read the number. "Please come forward for your turn on the block. Number 7!"

Mizuko stopped suddenly, staring at the number on the ticket in her hand.

"I believe that's your number," Amber said. Mizuko turned with a look of surprise. She stared accusingly at her treacherous friend and realized Amber had tricked her.

"Here's number 7!" Amber shouted. The crowd parted for Mizuko to make her way to the block. "Go on, shoo!" Amber said, shoving Mizuko toward the stage. "Have fun. It's harmless."

Mizuko looked back at her and signed, "I don't know about this. I'm supposedly with someone, you now."

Amber signed back, "Well, it's Valentine's Day. No flowers, no card, no phone call. Most importantly, he's not here. You are. So go have fun."

Mizuko shrugged and finally headed toward the auction amid good-natured applause. She couldn't help but wonder at her own action. She was pretty sure she shouldn't be doing this, but right now she found it rather hard to care. She just wanted to have a good time, like Amber said.

The disguised nymph stepped carefully onto the stage in high-heeled shoes she wasn't used to wearing and carefully stood in the center. The auctioneer was a short, wizened fellow with leathery butterfly wings and green skin. His unattractive and unassuming look was perfect for his role, since it made everyone look at who was up for auction.

Bidding started at a generous fifty dollars and quickly rose from there. At first the bids were slow to come in as the crowd tried to decide if she was attractive or scary. Things got active as a number of men held up signs to indicate their bid as the numbers spiraled upwards, included a number of what appeared to be male, as well as one female changeling. When the numbers hit three hundred, most dropped out, except for three men. One of those dropped out when the number hit five hundred, and the winner came in with a bid of six hundred fifty dollars.

Mizuko had stood uncomfortably in front of the crowd, but now that the bidding was over, she was helped down from the stage by the auctioneer and led to the winner. He had the appearance of an elemental, made of obsidian. The black volcanic glass shimmered in the light, and streaks of red, orange and white highlighted his form, which was clad in a tuxedo. He bowed slightly to her and offered his hand with a beguiling smile. She presented him with her hand, followed but a gracious curtsey of her own while her eyes studied his unique form.

"I consider myself the luckiest of men tonight." His voice had a faint Spanish accent and he pressed a kiss to her knuckles that was almost long enough to be venturing into the realm of the intimate.

Mizuko was still a moment, her mind making unwelcome but unavoidable comparisons. Then she squeezed his hand apologetically, pointed to her throat with her free hand and made a slicing, negative motion to indicate she would not speak.

"That is no problem," he replied in perfect sign.

Mizuko smiled in delight. "It appears you have me for at least a while tonight," Mizuko signed. "Though I didn't get a chance to read the rules. I hope you find the money you put up well spent."

Amber, seeing Mizuko well distracted, grinned impishly and slipped into the crowd.

Less stood nervously offstage, behind the curtain. The Winter courtiers had decided amongst them that auctioning off their King in the date auction was a fantastic idea. He would not tire until he had rooted out where this idea had originated. He had refused, saying that it was unseemly for his position to be involved in such things. They had countered that it would reinforce his 'of-the-people' image. In the end, they wore him down. He had agreed and now he severely regretted his moment of weakness but to not go through with it would ruin the mood of the evening. The winged man broke into a broad grin and Less knew the time had come. His stomach knotted.

"Please give a big hand to our next bachelor to the block. He hails from merrie old England, enjoys cool evening breezes and reading diaries. Our sovereign of the season, the man of the masquerade: the Winter King!"

There was a thunderous applause and spirited cheering that Less, as he began to stride out across the stage, suspected might be magically enhanced. As he came into view someone cued the sound system to play *Love Potion #9*. Less would kill them later. By the time Madame Rue was mixing up her concoction in her sink, Less had reached the block. He had chosen a skitterskulk seeming for the masquerade. Large compound eyes stood out on the sides of his head and his hair was covered in a carapace that stretched down the back of his neck. As he posed for the audience he smoothed back the long roach antennae that arched up and back.

Less' fellow insectoid Beast onstage piped up again. "Remember, boys and girls, whoever bids the highest for this tall, sleek and, uh, fashionable bachelor, will be Queen of the Ball for the night. Do I hear *one dollar!*?"

There was a pause, as if the crowd wasn't sure if this was for real or an example of Winter Court humor, but then a woman with a kind dark radiance dressed in a black ball gown and wearing a pale mask that probably didn't hide much of her features this evening raised her hand. Others about to bid lowered their hands as they realized from the circlet over the woman's head that this was in fact Queen Veridia.

Well, Ishtar couldn't let the King of Winter himself go for such a cheap price. The Queen of Spring, also marked by her own thorny crown, was dressed in a red ball gown with a matching silver and red mask. The effect blended perfectly with the tone of her skin such that portions of her costume seemed one with her. Given her own shapeshifting abilities and fae wardrobe, it was possible it was true. She raised her voice and said, "Fifty dollars!"

The rival queens quickly went into a bidding war that raged until a total of \$1000 was reached when the Queen of Spring bowed to Ishtar and conceded the bidding graciously. Veridia smiled in victory but as Ishtar turned away from the auction, Less caught her wink.

Less had watched the bidding war like a tennis match with a live grenade. Veridia's bids had given him a mounting dread but when Ishtar was on top icy fear descended down his spine. He spent most of the endless few minutes wringing his hands on one of his dangling antennae. He was actually relieved when Veridia finally won the bid, but when he looked into her mad, smiling face his relief fled to be replaced with worry. Was she hoping to control the Winter Court as Summer had tried to control Spring? Or just another show of support for the beleaguered Court? *It is just one evening*, he thought to himself as he descended the stairs into the crowd. It parted before him to give him a clear aisle to join his Queen.

Upon reaching Veridia, he bowed very low, nearly brushing the floor with his finger tips. He took a glass of wine from a passing steward and raised it to her before raising it high. He turned to the hall at large and shouted, "To the Queen of the Ball!"

Cheers went up and the crowd began to disperse as the auction of the Winter King was the highlight of the

event. Soon to come was the Motley Mating event.

Veridia might have smiled but one could not tell through the mask. She said quietly, "It seems my motley mates are busy with their own affairs tonight, as are yours. Perhaps this occasion will give us a chance to enjoy company. Ours is a position that can be lonely sometimes."

"There is a lot of responsibility that must be borne alone," admitted Less. "Though, my burden is only my crown. You must also deal with the loss of sweet Media." He turned to toast in the direction of the memorial photograph of Veridia's youngest sister so recently dead. "This ball is for you. And her."

Veridia gazed at the image of her sister and reflected upon it in silence. When she next spoke, her voice was cold. "It makes one wonder if she might be alive today had Spring arrived a few minutes sooner, doesn't it?"

He took her hand in both of his. "There will always be what ifs, Veridia. What if Circledell had never been stormed? What if Spring had never arrived at all? But the time for anger is over. Mourn her loss and feel the ache of her absence, but there is also joy in those memories. Her life was worthy of celebration and you have yours still to live. Perhaps you and Lydia will become even closer." Less was genuine but didn't want to be pulled into blame and melancholy. This was supposed to be a party.

Although Less could detect some anger in her, he knew his words had somewhat calmed her. The icy edge at least was gone, replaced by a more introspective tone. "It is said one must understand the past in order to be prepared for the future. Perhaps Cassandra, now Ishtar I suppose, arrived as soon as she could. Perhaps she was delayed because she had to take on the mantle of her new Entitlement in order to challenge the Goblin King and overcome him. But it begs questions such as, just what Entitlement could grant such shattering power? Did she have some of that the power already but had pretended weakness? If becoming an Ancient granted her that much power, would we not be wise to understand what she has done and understand what the ultimate price might be? Or if she already had the power, then why conceal it from us? Was she really so afraid of me?"

"You know that I, of all people, believe knowledge is power. We cannot know what the long-term consequences are, only that Ishtar benefits and supports the Duchy. We can only wait, and observe." Less tapped the centre of his roach face.

Veridia opted to skip the Speed Motley Mating event, and let Less go about his business for the night with just one request as part of having purchased Less for the evening. She wanted to have a dance partner for the Ball. Less bowed low to his queen and promised to reunite with her later.

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After the Auction but before the Speed Motley Mating, Less spotted another late arrival. He didn't recognize her at first but for the scarf. He was fairly certain this was Viscissitude, although if it was, she opted for no change in her Seeming or Kith. Her outfit was a functional black dress that underscored her lean and athletic shape rather than something specifically chosen for a Masquerade Ball, but she did wear a mask, which had made her difficult to identify if not for the scarf.

She made her way to the host of the evening and afforded him a bow in a gentlemanly fashion rather than a more feminine curtsy. She delivered her respects silently.

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### *Speed Motley Mating*

A few changelings organized around some tables that had been set up. A lot of them were simply participating in order to get a chance to mix with changelings of different courts, others were trying to take

advantage of this as a real opportunity to find new friends to invite into motleys who'd suffered losses during the autumn battles with the Goblin King.

Mizuko, whose company had already been purchased by the mysterious gentleman didn't participate. Instead, she spent time silently "talking" with him near the refreshments. She had surprised herself by already finishing one glass of champagne and was working on another. She'd promised herself to take it easy and keep an eye on Amber, but for some reason she found it difficult to do either.

Less had been freed up by Veridia and so had the opportunity to watch the changelings participating in the Speed Motley event. Although there were fewer than thirty participants in this event, it was nonetheless interesting to see who connected and who did not. The changelings (although one could suppose some disguised mortals might have joined in) polarized quickly, making it a little more like Speed Dating than what was intended. Less noted that at least two new couples seemed to especially hit it off.

Less whistled to himself as he wandered through the empty corridor behind the main hall. The fact that Vicissitude was wearing a plain black dress simplified his plans greatly. He had brought several dresses but he thought he was going to have to get Rover to work his magic to make a copy of Sissy's. He had a black dress - it was desperately out of style, but nobody would remember the details of what he was wearing. He looked around before letting himself into the storeroom with his supplies. Stripping out of his suit and cockroach seeming, he shifted his seeming to that of a darkling leechfinger and shaped limb after limb until he resembled Vicissitude's athletic form. He checked himself in the mirror to make sure he had remembered to Riddle-kith his crown away. He smiled as he wrapped the red and gold scarf around his neck. *There should be more masquerades in the year*, he thought. He strapped on a feathery bird mask and signaled to his reflection that the game was on.

He hurried back down the corridor, so as not to miss the Motley Speed Mating event. As re-entered the hall, a flash of gold caught his eye. In the midst of a small gang of Fairest-seeming changelings was Amber in her disguise for the evening. He didn't pay her much mind since his agents were tracking her, but he could tell by the way she was hanging off the *dancer* that she was well into her cups and ready to party. A wicked little laugh escaped his lips as he darted through the crowd.

It didn't take long to register for the Motley event. He signed the sheet with a defiant flourish as "Ghul". He (or to everyone else, she) chose a table and helped himself to a large helping of snacks while the other participants settled in. He watched them all carefully, making mental notes of their demeanor. He closed his eyes for a moment and let slip all the practiced humanity he had layered over his elemental being. The cool breezes of the vast sky blew it all away like tissue paper. He took a deep breath and, feeling free, opened his eyes. The bell rang and he turned to the man opposite. He looked to be a *muse* (there were a lot of Fairest here tonight) but he lacked the confidence of the type. Less, with his mouth full, mumbled for him to get on with it.

"Ok, so, I'm looking to join a motley. I've been alone since the Goblin King, you know. I'm quiet and neat. I don't smoke. Um, I have a stereo system that docks ipods. Yeah, um, you seem nice. Are you looking for a new motley too?"

Less let himself rip. "Not with you! Why don't you just go join Ishtar's gang of pussies!? I'm not surprised you don't have a motley. Your old mates probably didn't even die, they just took the opportunity to get away from you. They're probably all in some new place laughing about how you think they're all dead. Fuck, I'd probably have thrown myself under a goblin knight's horse to get away from you."

The whistle blew and Less flicked his plate across the table at his 'date' and stood up to switch tables.

The event continued with Less cutting a swath through the participants he was paired with. Some gave as good as they got but he didn't care. With every whistle it was as if nothing had happened.



"Phewf! Are you supposed to be an *earthbones* made of marble? Or cheese?"

"I wouldn't pledge with you if the whole Hedge burned down."

"You know what? I have a license to kill. Killing you all would give me job satisfaction!"

"Could you hand me that fork so I can stab my eyes out? Better yet, give me the spoon so I can dig out my eardrums!"

"You have less charm than the ogre I had up my ass last night!"

As the final whistle blew, Less strode off into the crowd. Mission accomplished. He unwound the scarf, balled it up, and fled the hall. He hoped the other participants had bonded over their shared antipathy toward his venom and made some useful connections. Changing his seeming to that of a sleek, black and white magpie, he hid once again in his storeroom and changed back into the Winter King.

Rey's Valentine's Day didn't start off very well, but after a [pleasant dinner](#), she and Richard made their way to Iron Mountain for the ball. Halfway to the old mine entrance, Rey called upon the Contract of Riddle-Kith<sup>?</sup>, and her appearance shifted to that of a Darkling Palewraith, her flesh and hair appearing as if smoke had somehow been forced into human form.

When they arrived at the table where the guests were to sign in, Rey handed over her invitation and signed "Ms. Ouri" in the guest book. She waited off to one side for Richard while he obtained his costume token, watching the other latecomers arrive.

Richard returned a moment later — at least she thought it was Richard since he was wearing the same clothes. But there was no trace of minotaur or the Beast at all in him. Now he appeared as a large ogre, massive of girth and strong of jaw. The gristle-grinder disguise suited his size, but contrasted with his normally gentle manner toward Rey. He grinned at her and it was hard not to think of those teeth tearing into flesh and grinding up bone.

"My, what big teeth you have," she said, her Louisiana accent replaced with the faintly upper-class British one her parents had forced her to use as a child. She wondered if the change in his outer appearance might get him to loosen up somewhat. Not that she wanted to make out with him in public, but she'd not turn down a long, lingering hug.

"The better to sample the hors d'oeuvres." Richard grinned, showing even more pearly whites. His voice hadn't changed all that much, she discovered.

Rey took his arm and curled her fingers around his hard muscles and walked with him into the rooms beyond. From the look of things, the Speed Motley Mating even was still going on, which meant they'd have some time to mingle and wander a bit before the dancing began. That was the part she was looking most forward to. She loved moving around the dance floor with him, and reminded herself that she should find out what the hours for Salta were, for the next time they might have a few hours in the evening together.

The evening had quite a large turnout, Rey thought, and she hoped the evening went well - and not just for her own benefit. The Duchy needed a time to relax and put the pains of the Siege and the Battle of Cirledell where they belonged - in the past. Not to be forgotten - never forgotten - but it was time to move on. Rejoice in the loves we have, remember fondly the loves we'd lost, and find, perhaps, something for the future.

She looked up at Richard and smiled at him, knowing her Seeming for the evening made it difficult to read her expressions at times. Rey hoped, though, he knew it was there.

"I wonder if Claire and the other former Dusk members are here," he remarked conversationally. "I doubt we

can tell, at least before midnight. I feel a little like I came to a party in an entirely different freehold."

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### *Rey's Valentine's Day*

February 14th did not start off auspiciously. Rey'd awoken trembling and shaking just before 3 am. The terror and pain-filled screams gradually faded from her mind as she swung her feet over the side of her bed. She knew she wouldn't be able to get back to sleep, so she grabbed her silk robe from the hook on the back of the door and wrapped it tight around her.

Padding down the hallway in the dark, she flipped on the light in the bathroom and, squinting against the glare, turned the furnace up. A glass of water and some painkillers for the headache she knew from experience she was going to have later, she curled up on the couch and pulled a blanket around her. Rey brushed her cheek against the warm fabric and inhaled the faint traces of Richard's scent from it. The last time he was here, they'd sat together on the couch, she in his lap and the blanket wrapped around them both. They'd put a movie in, but wound up talking instead. She hadn't started the evening in his lap; she kind of ended up there. The evening had been cold and she'd been feeling playful, but more importantly, she just wanted to be close to him.

Rey didn't know why she loved being held by him. Perhaps it was because he could so easily harm her if he wasn't careful. She felt a thrill being held by him, the slight feeling of helplessness when he picked her up to hug and kiss her. She wondered if somehow he knew what it did to her, how those sudden, unexpected embraces in public made her feel, especially when she knew what a private person he was. Sometimes it was so frustrating, how difficult it was just to get a simple, casual touch, but the passion he showed when they were alone... Just the thought of it made her heart speed up and she could almost feel the caress of his hand on her face.

A phone call interrupted her musing. Only work would call her at this ungodly hour, and she was right. It was Andreas, the night manager for the casino. There'd been a situation on the casino floor and some people had been hurt. The police were on their way, but he thought she would want to know.

Twenty minutes later she was talking to the head of security and making sure the police got what they needed for their investigation. One of the officers asked her she was doing, and Rey recognized him as one of the men she'd talked to after her kidnapping. He was a nice young man – he'd been on the force for a couple of years – and he was still at the point where genuine concern hadn't been jaded by what she knew were the horrible things he'd see on the job. She thanked him for his concern and chatted with him for a while before his partner was ready to head back to the station.

Rey didn't bother going back home. She was wide awake now, so she got something to eat from the Market Square and a large coffee from the Blue Bean before heading up to her office. Booting up her computer, she figured she might as well get a head start on the day's work.

At 7:30, her assistant walked into her office carrying a huge gift basket filled with cookies and truffles, who was startled to see Rey there and already at work. Her assistant didn't know who the basket was from, but it was already on her desk when she arrived. While the tiny card was addressed to her, there was no note nor was it signed. She put the basket on the small coffee table on the far side of her office but before she was able to sit back down her phone rang, putting an end to her peace for the rest of the day.

By the time 3 pm came around, Rey had dealt with team of four people attempting to cheat at poker, someone trying to cash in fake chips, a VIP thinking he could manhandle the female staff, a guest in the hotel refusing to pay because he didn't stay in the room (his evil twin did), and the aftermath of a wild bachelor party that left one of the high end suites completely trashed.

Just as her day at work started talking with the police, it ended talking with them. Handing over the security video from the early morning assault and making sure the police had everything they needed for the charges to be laid against the cheaters was the last thing she did before she told her assistant she was leaving for the day.

She was getting out of her car when she realized she'd left the gift basket in her office. She was too tired to go back to get it; the fact she didn't know who it was from wasn't much of an incentive to turn around. Once inside, she tossed her keys and purse onto the kitchen table and thought about what she was going to do next. Rey was expecting to go to the Winter Formal that night, if only to put in an appearance to support Less. She also knew she'd be spending some time with Richard but was unsure as to when, or how long, or even where they were going to go.

Rey decided to make sure part of her gift for Richard was ready to go. She'd handmade some "coupons", similar to what children often made for Mother's Day. Where a child might offer to clean the kitchen once, her offers were a bit more intimate, such as a massage, or a romantic dinner for two. They were all things she would love to do for him, and she hoped he'd know that and be willing to trade them in. Each coupon had taken her an hour to do; she'd taken blank business cards and carefully decorated them with carefully lettered text and borders with vines and thorns reminiscent of those surrounding her body.

She hoped he liked them, and that she wouldn't feel like a fool for giving such a relatively silly gift. Rey had been spending what time she could spare to do some hedgespinning. She was making a matching pair of bracers, one for herself, for Richard and herself. She'd completed his but was only about half done with hers, but she was going to give it to him tonight. She didn't want to wait.

After she checked and made sure the dozen coupons were in the envelope with the card and it was on the table next to her purse, she decided she'd take a quick hot shower and then grab some sleep. She knew it was going to be a late night and she wanted to make sure she'd be alert.

The elegant strains of Hole in the Wall woke Rey from sleep, and she blindly reached for her cell phone on the nightstand. "Richard?"

"Merry meet, Rey." His sonorous voice filled her ear and she couldn't help but smile. "Are you home?"

"Yes," she replied and rolled over onto her side. "Why?"

"I knocked, and you didn't answer."

"You knocked?" Rey cracked her eyes open to peer at the clock but her eyes were still blurry from sleep.

"What time is it?"

"Half past six."

Rey shot upright, now wide awake. "Oh shoot! I slept through the alarm. I'm so sorry." She stood, pulling on her robe one-handed. "You're outside, right? Come on in. The door's open." She stepped into the hallway, the emerald silk robe hanging open around her as Richard walked in through the front door carrying a large covered dish and a grocery bag. His expression brightened when he saw, and she knew from the look in his eyes he was enjoying seeing her body as she approached him.

When she met him in the kitchen she eagerly stepped into his embrace. With an unreserved contented sigh, she rested her head against his chest.

"Are you alright," he asked, gently caressing the side of her cheek as he tilted her head back so he could see her face.

"Yes." Rey smiled up at him, the pleasure of being in his company bright in her eyes. "Especially now that you're here." Her hand stroked his back fondly. "It's been a long, rough day. I left work early so I could come home and take a nap." She laughed softly. "I'd planned to be ready and waiting for you, but it's obvious that's not going to happen."

She gave him another hug. "Would you mind if I went and got dressed while you started getting things ready?"

"Don't feel you need to on my account." The corners of his mouth twitched and his hands caressed her back.

A wickedly seductive smile blossomed on her face. "No, more for mine, I think, to remind me not to go charging straight for dessert when there's an entire meal waiting to be eaten and enjoyed." With a lithe, almost boneless grace, she turned in his arms and in stepping away from him also stepped out of her robe, leaving it in his hands. She strolled casually toward the bedroom, every movement an acknowledgment – and encouragement – of his eyes on her.

Rey wasn't more than a few steps down the hall before Richard moved to follow her. Satisfaction fed the curl of desire licking through her. When she reached the foot of the bed she turned and grew in size to match her beloved. "So it is to be dessert first tonight," she purred. Even as she closed the distance between them, hungry for his kiss, her brambles and thorns shifted to give him access to her body.

He pulled her tight against him, one hand between her shoulder blades, the other on the swell of her rear. Rey favored him with short deep moan of pleasure when their groins met and she felt his desire for her straining valiantly against the fabric of his trousers. She slid her hands between them and slid them up his chest and over his shoulders, pushing his jacket off his shoulders and down his arms. Even before the jacket hit the ground she was working on the buttons of his shirt. She wanted nothing more than to just rip the shirt off him, sending the buttons flying so she could get to his skin, but they hadn't broached that topic. Not yet,

but soon. Very soon.

Richard's shirt join his jacket on the floor and her nimble fingers made quick work of his belt and pants, and she paused only long enough to remove the rest of his clothes and boots before returning to her sensual assault. She gently pushed him down to sit on the foot of the bed and she knelt between his feet. Without a word she took him in her mouth, willingly giving him pleasure but just until she knew he'd started to ache with need.

She withdrew slowly, her lips and tongue making a torturous retreat until his huge shaft was once again exposed to the cool air. Before he could give any thought to protest she climbed into his lap facing him, her heated core pressed against him but not taking him inside.

"Remember what I said to you in the ballroom at the Twelfth Night event, about how you could have me in almost any way you wanted?" Rey paused to nip at his lower lip before moving on to kiss and gently nip along his jaw to his ear. "I meant it. You don't have to hold back. Sweet and slow or wild and fierce, I want it all, and I'll give as good as I get."

Richard stilled beneath her. After a few heartbeats Rey wondered if she'd made a mistake. She pulled her head back so she could see his face and saw there a combination of fierce desire and hesitation. Cupping his face with both hands she said "no broken bones, no bleeding worse than a scratch, and just about any position is fine with me. Anything else, we'll see how it goes."

The words were barely out of her mouth when he was kissing her again, tasting her deep and pulling just as hungry a reaction from her. She returned it with all her heart and drew her claws lightly down his back. Richard's hand tightened on her hips, then slid down to cup her rear. With a single fluid movement, he picked her up and twisted so their positions were reversed. As she'd done to him, he kissed and nibbled his way from her mouth to her neck, memorizing each delighted response he got from her. When he reached the most sensitive spot on her neck and closed his teeth on it she gasped and arched beneath him as the tugs of pleasure went all the way to her groin.

He smiled against her skin and kept going, working his way with kisses down to between her breasts while his hands moved over her body. His touch was both possessive and reverent. He was laying claim to her flesh as her lover but at the same time expressing the pleasure and fascination he felt.

Rey did not lie quietly beneath him, and she was true to her promise. Her hands were never still, touching him as he touched her. When her hand reached his turgid member, she took it in a firm grasp and stroked him. With an expert hand she pleased him as he lavished attention on her breasts. He alternated kiss and tongue with his teeth, pulling her nipple up into his mouth before sucking on it. All he had to do was listen to her to know she liked it. Her moans, sighs and gasps were a new language he wanted to hear more of.

Leaving her breasts he continued downward, kissing his way ever lower. When he reached her belly button he flicked it with his tongue before moving toward her mossy mound. The way her body tensed when she anticipated his touch delighted him and urged him on. He traced Rey's nether lips with a finger then his tongue and smiled at the needy noises she made and the way she squirmed. Richard placed a hand on each thigh and pushed down slightly, holding her in place. The noises became louder and she struggled slightly

against his grip. With a smile she couldn't see, he bent his head and gave her a long slow upward lick, his tongue dipping deep into her folds until he reached the little thing that had surprised him before.

He released one of her thighs, only to press down on it with his forearm to keep her immobile, and parted her now slick flesh. There he saw her clitoris was pierced vertically, with a tiny ball above and below it. It wasn't too difficult to realize the piercing heightened the sensations in the swollen little nub of flesh. He flicked it with his tongue and was rewarded with a lust-filled whine as she struggled to move.

"Do you like it?" Rey asked, her voice ragged with desire. "I was thinking of you when I got it done. Hoping you might like to play—" Her words were cut off by a half moan, half shout of pleasure when he sucked on the tender flesh. "Richard!" He did it again, and again, then slipped a finger inside her. She squirmed and bucked, forcing him to use more force to hold her down. He slipped another finger in and rubbed the magic spot inside her while massaging her clit with his thumb. She cried out with a need that bordered on painful.

He continued to stroke her, playing with her while he kissed his way back up her body, using the weight of his body to pin her down. Her breathing was ragged, her pupils dilated, and her thorns and brambles moved restlessly and erratically. "Please Richard. I need more than just your fingers." The minotaur centered himself between her legs and with a single move, he lifted her hips and thrust deeply, burying himself in as deep as he could go, his own moan of pleasure interwoven with her cries of relief.

Richard bent over so he was on all fours over her, placing her hands in such a way that she was pinned between his arms and legs, unable to move and at his mercy. She forced her eyes open, wanting to see him as they made love. His face was a mask of concentration and determination, and the heat in his eyes was unlike anything she'd seen in them before. Each thrust was forceful, strong enough to move her on the bed but without any immediate pain. Rey knew she'd hurt later, a deep internal ache because it had been so long since she'd to being taken this way, but it was a pain she welcomed. It was a reminder of great pleasure, one that would leave her weak and trembling.

He continued to move in and out of her, each second taking them both closer to climax. For her, it wasn't enough. Clamping down on him and crunching her abdominal muscles, she lifted herself up, forcing Richard to shift his hands to beneath her to hold her in place. "Better," she growled, and kissed him fiercely. Rey was determined to outlast him, to experience his orgasm before she succumbed to hers. She tried to change the rhythm of the coupling but he fought it, gripping her hard. She wrapped her legs around his waist to let gravity add to the depth of his thrusts. She put every muscle she could flex to use, grasping him tightly with each move.

Rey whispered encouragement in his ear, urging him on even as her hands caressed and worked every part of him she could reach. She could feel him getting closer but he was holding himself back, delaying his own gratification until she'd found hers. That was not, however, part of her plan. She kissed her way down the side of his neck once more, making sure that with each undulating motion of her body she was rubbing against him.

After what felt like an eternity, she felt him falter and then she knew she had him. "You. Are. Mine," she growled, punctuating each word with a progressively stronger bite until she reached the sensitive spot on his neck. Whether it was coincidence or her seductive skills she didn't know, nor did she care. With the last bite

she broke his control. He surged forward, pounding her into the mattress until he came with an exultant shout. He emptied himself into her with every thrust and kept moving, determine to make her go as hard as he did.

Richard grabbed her knees and lifted them, rolling her hips up and back until her feet were in the air. The new position put Rey at a disadvantage again and he used it. Ruthlessly he played with her as he pistoned in and out until she couldn't control it anymore. She came with a hoarse scream, her body bucking and writhing beneath him, stopping only once he'd wrung every last drop of pleasure out of her.

He stayed with in, in her, until her body quieted and her breathing slowed. Rey wrapped her legs around him, not quite ready for him to leave her as the sweat on both their bodies cooled. She reached up with both hands to caress his face before pulling him down to her so she could lie in his arms. When awareness of the world beyond their share passion returned to his eyes, she said "I love you. And this time, you were perfect."

Richard smiled at her and put his lips to hers in a long, slow kiss laden with affection and appreciation. He withdrew and rolled onto his back, bringing her with him tucked close to his side. She sighed and laid her head on his chest. She hadn't felt this well loved since before she was Taken. Chase certainly had managed to satisfy her sexually, but the biggest payoff, the part that came from strong emotional attachment wasn't there. That she'd found with Richard, and he was definitely what the doctor ordered, so to speak.

She stopped for a moment, wondering if she ought to feel some guilt for thinking about another man while she lay with another. Rey didn't, and she knew why. She wouldn't deny she loved Chase, because that would be a lie. But not only did she love Richard, she was in love with him and that made all the difference. The contentment that knowledge gave her made her body soften and she relaxed against him.

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### *Rey's Valentine's Day Dinner*

"That was delicious," Rey said with a happy, contented smile as she set down her fork. "You are a wonderful cook." The stress of her horrible day was completely gone, thanks in a large part to the huge minotaur seated next to her.

Richard chuckled. "It's the recipe, not me. I'm a very plain cook. If I haven't cooked it before or it's not from a recipe, I'm pretty awful. I have no sense of what goes together, and that includes all spices except salt and pepper."

When the last thing was placed in the dishwasher, Rey turned to Richard and said "Wait right here. I have something I want to give you."

She opened one of the lower cabinet doors and retrieved a velvet drawstring bag. After getting the envelope from where it had been placed on the counter, she offered both to him. "Happy Valentine's Day." Her eyes



were alive with anticipation, hoping he'd like the gifts.

He faked surprised. "Valentine's? It's Valentine's Day already?" But he broke into a grin and dug something out of his jeans pocket and gave it to Rey. It was a little black box, the kind that flipped open without a latch. Then he took a peek at what Rey presented him. Inside the envelope were a dozen tiny business-card sized cards, each one carefully decorated with a hand-drawn artwork. Each one was different – some had flowering vines, others brambles and thorns – and each was inscribed with the text of a coupon. "Good for one massage", "breakfast in bed", and "a long walk in the woods" were just a few of them, and there were a dozen of the cards in all.

He bent toward her and kissed her. "Thank you Rey. This is really sweet."

Holding the velvet bag in his hand, Richard could tell there was something large and cylindrical inside, but it didn't prepare him for what he saw when he withdrew the object. It was a large silver bracer, about four inches long, and it looked as if a length of Rey's brambles had been wrapped around and fused into it.

He examined it and held it up, marveling at the workmanship from several angles. "This is amazing work, Rey," he murmured. "And there is magic here. What does it do?"

"It will cover you with armor when you activate it," Rey said. "From head to toe. Breastplate, greaves, the works, and the helmet will accommodate your horns. It looks like lacquered wood the same color of my thorns. It won't protect you nearly as well as your armor, but I didn't make it to replace that suit. It's meant to help if you wind up in an unexpected dangerous situation."

"Thank you, Rey." He engulfed her in a hug for a moment. "This is truly amazing."

Rey was surprised and pleased at receiving a gift from Richard. She hadn't expected to receive one, but was nonetheless thrilled. She carefully opened the box, wondering what might be inside. It was a necklace with a fine silver chain. There was a hand-wrought device within which was a tear-shaped gem. Although smooth, it fractured light and sparkled unlike any earthly gem Rey had seen. Its mounting was hand-wrought but artistic, extending from the gem heart like the spiral arms of a galaxy.

She couldn't contain her gasp of delight and awe. "I've never seen anything so beautiful before." She examined it more closely in amazement.

"I'm a weaponsmith, lacking in skills to produce something as amazing and magical as you have given me, but when I saw that necklace, I could not help but think it a perfect accessory to highlight your natural beauty," he told her.

Rey couldn't keep herself from blushing. "Thank you, Richard. For everything." She wrapped her arms around him and held him close. "I'm making a matching bracer for myself, but it's not finished yet." She pulled back slightly so she could look up at him. "I've always been good with my hands, an artsy type. I love making things for the people who matter to me. I made Less' suit for him, and Mizuko's dress, the one she wore to Twelfth Night. I wanted to make something very special for you, and when I saw that metal, I knew what I was going to make. It's a piece of an armagant's carapace. I'm told it's a cross between an armadillo



and an elephant with the disposition of an angry wild boar.”

“An angry boar, eh?” he said with raised eyebrow. “How did you find such an unusual piece? Or is that something I don’t want to know?” He grinned.

“I was going to my Hollow when I heard the sound of two animals fighting nearby.” Her grin matched his. “Given my love of adventure, I went to check it out in case it might be a threat to the Duchy. It was two armagants fighting, though over what I cannot say. They were too busy goring each other to shred to notice me. The winner ate his fill and then left. I grabbed several pieces of the carapace, some of its claws and one of the tusks and stashed them in my Hollow. I took two of the pieces to the 13th Street Market and bartered them for some other things I wanted.” Rey shook her head. “The tusks on those things are literally as big as your arm.”

Both Changelings heard the sound of a flap opening and closing behind them, and when they looked they saw a tiny grey cat. “Oh, there you are, Hamilton,” she said from her place in Richard’s arms. “Hamilton, I’d like you to meet Richard, Paladin of Shadows of the Desert Duchy. Richard, I’d like you to meet Hamilton, a very good friend. One of my best friends, actually. He braved the Hedge to find me the night I was Taken.”

“A true survivor, then.” Richard rubbed him under the jaw.

“Ah,” said Hamilton comfortably. “So you do have at least one friend with basic knowledge of etiquette.” He purred comfortably.

Richard stared at the cat, who’d closed his eyes, and at Rey. He wasn’t sure it was safe to stop rubbing the strange cat’s lower jaw.

Rey chuckled. “Hamilton, if you’re hungry, I’ve got some steak for you in the fridge, and I think I spotted your catnip mouse under the bed.”

“Food? Food is good,” he replied. He hopped down and pawed at the fridge, then waited for Rey to get it for him. “I think I will be going out tonight,” he said in a whimsical tone. “I’d like to go on a prowl, get the lay of the land around here.”

“There’s a beautiful queen a few doors down,” she said as she placed the plate of already cut-up steak on the floor before returning to Richard’s side and slipped an arm around his waist.

“A queen, Miss?” Hamilton looked up from his steak. “What do you mean?”

“Well, toms are boy cats and queens are girl cats,” Rey said with a smile. “She’s very friendly, though not much of a conversationalist.” She didn’t know if Hamilton would be interested in sex, or even be subject to mating urges, but she wanted to give him the heads up anyway. The changeling knew that female cat wasn’t spayed. Or he just might give her a disgusted look and go back to eating.

He sniffed. “Well, if she can’t participate in conversation, she’s about as interesting as a half naked nymph.” With that somewhat cryptic remark, he returned his attention to his steak.

Rey choked back a laugh and looked up at Richard. “Before I forget, after you use the bracer, you’ll feel kind

of stiff and itchy all over for a little while. More annoying than dangerous or damaging. And the armor's really lightweight and flexible, so it shouldn't impede you when you're moving around."

Richard wanted to scratch his head at Hamilton's remark but shook it off and told Rey, "I'm sure it will be fine. I'll test it out tomorrow morning."

"I think I may hold off wearing the necklace until after the ball." Her smile was slow and sexy. "So we have time for me to model it for you properly, before I wear it out in public."

"As you like, my darling," he said with a return smile.

"So I've been promoted to darling, have I?" Rey's grin had a cheeky edge to it. "Or should I say Darkling. I was thinking about going as one tonight. What about you? Have you decided yet?"

"I'm stuck between a fairest dragon, if I can pull off the snob bit, or an ogre gristlegrinder."

Rey gave him a look of mock dismay. "Are you saying I'm a snob because I'm a Fairest?" She laughed, and then continued. "I think perhaps an ogre gristlegrinder. You may have less of a concern about your size being out of sync with your seeming. Unless those tokens will change your size as well. I didn't think to ask."

"I don't know, I hadn't really thought about that. If they do resize me, then that's not good either since my suit might fall off."

"You know how I feel about your birthday suit." Rey caressed his chest with her right hand, loving the feel of him under her hand. "And I like you this size. Your hugs are the best I've ever gotten."

Richard eyed her then folded his arms. "Do you have any idea how mushy we've been already tonight? I hope they don't strip us of our scary Autumnness," he said, but smiled.

"I won't tell if you won't," Rey replied immediately and glanced at the clock. "We'd better get ready. Think we can hold off the mushies if we both get changed in the bedroom?" She grinned.

"I'm pretty sure we won't." He nodded toward the stove clock. It was already hours past the start time of the ball. "Unless you'd rather skip tonight?"

"No, I want to go," Rey said with a shake of her head. "I missed Less' really big night, the night he first took his place on the throne. I don't want to bail on this."

Rey changed into her evening dress, putting on her lingerie and thigh high stockings with silent efficiency. It was a new floor length gown, one purchased specifically for that night. It was a deep coal black, but shot with red metallic threads. When she moved, and the light was right, the dress would have little glints like sparks of ruby fire. A few minutes in the bathroom to do her hair and she was ready to go. She was met by Richard who had used his time well and then they left for the ball.

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"It does feel like that, doesn't it," Rey agreed. "The whole mood of the place, of the people, is different. It's

good." She sighed, but it was a happy one. "It's what the Duchy needed, I think. The theme of the Winter Formal certainly helps, but I think the masquerade has given it an extra oomph. It lets us be more, do more, than we normally would. A kind of freedom for ourselves, even if only for a few hours."

Richard's stomach rumbled. "Oops, sorry," he said, embarrassed. "Hazard of this disguise I guess."

She looked around the room and spotted a very unusual-looking female ogre and an extremely handsome stone (or perhaps earth) elemental, off to one side and speaking in sign language. "I think I've spotted Mizuko. I don't know of many Changelings that use sign."

"And she's standing near the refreshments and — are those meat rolls I see?" He licked his lips.

Rey chuckled as she said "I guess dinner at my place wasn't enough for you. Let's go see if those are indeed meat rolls." She strolled with him toward the food and drink, though she kept an eye on Mizuko and the man she was speaking with. Her friend had recently finished teaching her sign language, and Rey was curious as to what they were discussing.

While Richard mumbled something about dessert and began looking over the assortment, Rey watched the hand signs. She couldn't catch much of what the man of stone was saying, but Mizuko was saying something about not being much of a dancer.

"If you don't mind sticking with simple things or slow movements, I'll follow your lead as best I can," she signed. He responded with something Rey couldn't see and Mizuko smiled, nearly a laugh. "Perhaps," she said with a nod. "Or I might just become clumsy."

Rey wasn't sure if Mizuko could see her, but she quickly signed "Make sure you fall into him, rather than away. More fun that way." Her hands' movements were light and playful, conveying the mood along with the words.

Mizuko had caught Rey's sign and figured out who it was by that as well as body language. "Hello Rey," Mizuko signed back. "Good point about the falling. I am also not used to wearing these tall heeled shoes. I will try not to skewer any feet, though." Mizuko inclined her head toward Rey and her perhaps not-so-mysterious companion so that her own companion might know who she was talking to.

"Have you seen the Winter King?" Mizuko asked. "Very colorful. I've never seen him in anything like that before. Or anyone, really..."

"No, we just got here. Dinner took a bit longer than we expected," she signed with a slight smile. Rey glanced over at Richard and saw he was perusing the food, and turned her attention back to her friend. "Who's your companion?" She ran her eyes over what she could see of him and liked what she saw - he was certainly pleasant to look at, but her affections (and lust) were already engaged elsewhere.

"Vidre," Mizuko signed, briefly spelling his name. "He bought me at the auction, but it's Amber's doing. Have you seen her? That girl is in trouble with me. She wandered off somehow and I explicitly told her not to do that."

"Bought you. You mean the Date Auction?" Rey signed in surprise.

"If it wasn't for Amber, it wouldn't have happened," Mizuko signed. "She got a ticket, which just isn't a good idea for her. I took it away and was returning it when the number was called. One thing led to another and Vidre won me." The smile she aimed at Vidre was a little coy. "But it has turned out well so far."

Rey gave a little laugh, and put a hand on Richard's arm to get his attention. "Mizuko was conned into entering the Date Auction, and this gentleman was the winner." She looked back at Mizuko. "How much did

you go for?"

"What I paid doesn't matter," the obsidian man said as he turned to face Rey. "The money was going to a good cause, and I would have spent more if necessary to enjoy her company this evening."

Mizuko moved so they could all be included in the signed conversation. Richard smiled and nodded at them, then returned to assembling a large plate of tasty morsels from the various offerings.

"I have no idea why he says that," Mizuko put in. "I'm a hag! And I have tusks. I've already bit my own lip twice." She smiled anyway, pleased with his complimentary remarks.

"Not everyone judges people based on their appearance," Rey said, and fought the desire to go over to Richard and wrap herself around him. "And tonight, you are a rather unusual hag." She glanced at Vidre's face. "And I suspect your date may have suspected there was more to you than your tusks."

Vidre's face was calm, but the brief look he gave her told her everything she needed to know. Rey believed now he knew it was Mizuko beneath that ogre seeming and it made her curious as to what he was after - and who he really was.

Mizuko eyed Vidre. "More than my tusks? Maybe it's these?" She put her hands under her breasts and lifted them suggestively.

Both Rey and Vidre laughed. "Those are indeed quite nice," Vidre said, "but I am more a leg and ass man."

Richard looked around to see what he was missing but the show was past and he'd missed it. Unsure how the conversation ended up with legs and asses, he just smiled and offered Rey some of the treats he'd looted.

"You must have liked what you saw then," Mizuko stated in sign, "at the price you paid. But you are right, the cause is a good one. I'm sure the Duchy will be strengthened as well as the charity." Mizuko addressed Rey. "Vidre and I will be dancing tonight, despite my warning of possibly impaling feet with my heels. Will you two be dancing tonight as well?"

"That's our intention, or was before he saw the refreshment table," Rey replied with a bemused smile. "I'm sure we'll be on the dance floor at least a couple of times."

Richard pause to look at Rey, then shrugged and continued eating.

Mizuko nodded, then signed, "Amber is a pretty little darkling wearing a scarf. If you see her, will you please tell her I'm looking for her?"

"Will do." Rey took a tiny pastry off the plate, then gesture for Richard to bend over a bit. She stepped in close and when his mouth was empty, whispered something in his ear before moving back to watch his face.

He grinned and set the plate back down. "So, when does the dancing start? I want to know so I can prepare for the worst."

Vidre looked between Richard and Rey with a touch of confusion and concern, but it cleared when he saw the amusement on Rey's face. "I believe it will be starting in about ten minutes or so." He offered his arm to Mizuko. She took it in both her hands, drawing close to him in a rather familiar way.

The obsidian changeling smiled and glanced at Rey before leading Mizuko away. She considered warning him not to trifle with Mizuko, not to take advantage of her friend, but reined in her protective streak. Mizuko could, for the most part, take care of herself. Rey tried not to catalog the numerous ways Mizuko might get herself into trouble during the rest of the evening.

Once they were safely out of earshot, Richard remarked, "Well that was just about the best piece of news so far tonight." He was keeping his voice low enough that only Rey should be able to hear, although the reality was that changelings had just about any kind of power imaginable and that included supernaturally acute hearing in some cases. "This could be a perfect opportunity, Rey. Even if this Vidre isn't a good match for her, anything is better than her current boyfriend."

Rey nodded. "I just hope that if he does manage to break her heart that she doesn't rip it out and do nasty things to it." She didn't add that's what she'd likely do if someone broke her heart. She moved in closer to him, her body brushing his. "If we manage to get through this evening without a catastrophe occurring, perhaps the next time you've got a few hours in the evening off we can go to Salta, a dance club in Santa Fe."

"We can talk about that." He was frowning.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing," he said. "I just thought you'd have a more positive reaction. If she becomes interested in someone else, we might not have to worry about Remy Deprez and his friends anymore."

"I'm sorry." Rey sighed. "I want her to be happy, and I want her to be safe. I'm just trying not to get too excited and get my hopes up that there may be something beyond this moment." She shook her head. "Maybe you're right. This seeming is affecting me. I'm starting to feel like there's this... dark cloud wanting to close in around me." She took a deep breath and made an effort to banish her darker thoughts, and lifted her hand still holding the almost forgotten pastry and offered it to him.

He shook his head, smiled, and then put an arm around her. "Let's mingle a bit."

Rey popped the tidbit into her mouth and hugged him close with a little smile. She happily remained at his side, almost tucked up against him, as they started to walk around the room. "Have you spoken to Clare recently? I was wondering how she's doing." She wouldn't pretend Clare was her friend, but she liked and respected her, and she was a friend of Richard's and that counted for quite a bit.

"Yes. I invited her to join my motley, but she turned me down," he remarked. "I wonder what disguise she would have chosen for tonight."

Rey was rather surprised they weren't already in a motley together. "I'm not sure what she might be wearing. It's hard to guess." She scanned the room, wondering who was who, and for a moment, she thought she saw the crown of the Winter King on the other side of the room. "Who else is in your motley?"

"Queen Veridia and Magistrate Lydia."

The fact Veridia and Lydia were in a motley together did not surprise Rey, nor did it surprise her Richard had been asked to join. It must have been doubly hard, she thought, when Media died - Veridia and Lydia had lost not only a motley mate but a sister. For a moment, she wondered if Less knew about the motley, but pushed the thought aside. Of course he'd know. He'd been here a long time, and motleys aren't exactly secret clubs.

"Say, do you think that might be Clare?" she asked, pointing out a Wizen that seemed to be watching them as they moved through the crowd.

He smiled. "I have no idea."

Vidre and Mizuko roved among the knots of conversing changelings with the occasional social mark about

the party or compliments on particularly creative costumes. They'd found their way to what felt like a private space to talk and wait for the Ball to begin when Vidre spotted a pair of female changelings heading toward them.

One of them looked to be a twisted old crone in a black dress with strangely black eyes and grey hair that had been carefully sculpted to resemble horns. She was accompanied by a young leechfinger, both pale and beautiful. Mizuko signed a greeting to Amber, but she only stared back. Then Mizuko realized that this masked woman, although wearing a similar scarf, was dressed differently than her friend.

"So, Mizuko," she said, "I see you brought your boyfriend. Having a good time are we?"

There were a handful of women whom Vidre heard had taken an active dislike to Mizuko, but given the nature of the ball, he was unsure who these two were. Instead, he remained quiet as he looked to his companion to see if she would speak or if she would like him to act as an interpreter for her.

*"I brought no boys, Vicissitude."*

The crone crooked a finger at Vidre. "And that is no vampire, Sissy."

Sissy gestured at the two of them. "But you two look like a couple, when you are dating..." Sissy feigned shock. "Oh dear! I certainly put my foot in it, didn't I. Here you are, trying to broaden your horizons instead of limiting your activities to having sex with the dead and then I come along and make a mess of things. I'm sorry, Mizuko. I guess I should just mind my own business."

The crone next to her looked at Sissy and then Mizuko. Mizuko's face was very pale, which in her current guise made her look very ill indeed.

*"It's okay,"* Mizuko said weakly. *"I forgive you."*

Sissy was about to spout some other venomous tidbit but the crone grabbed her ear between a boney knuckle and her thumb. "Come along, Sissy. That's enough." Vicissitude's eyes grew wide in surprise and pain, but the crone forced her to move along.

Mizuko stood blinking in the wake of Sissy's destructive insinuations. Her hands were cold, her face pale, and she thought she was about to lose her temper and do something very, very destructive.

Vidre took a step that put him between Mizuko and the path Vicissitude had been dragged away on. He took her hands in his and raised them to his lips for a gentle kiss. "We are here to enjoy ourselves tonight, Mizuko, to celebrate those we have loved and lost, and those we may come to love in the future. Forget her and her taunts. Tonight she is not worth it."

I could kill her, Mizuko wanted to say. I could make her explode right out of those pretty shoes she has and let her die.

She didn't, though. Through the fog of anger, she recognized the valiant effort he put in. The contact especially helped. Her expression gradually changed to that of surprise. *"What she said isn't exactly accurate. I do have vampire friends."* She had no idea why she just said that. She seemed unable to stop herself. *"I've even had sex with one or two of them a few times, but to me he seemed very much alive. But I don't think I can call him a boyfriend. I think he is interested in me, but not that interested in me. Until recently I had been hoping for more, but I realized I'd been acting a fool, looking for something that wasn't there."*

Mizuko flushed, looking embarrassed. *"I have no idea why I just said all that."*

"Sometimes we feel the need to explain things to others to help ourselves understand or come to terms with it." Vidre pulled her gently closer, until their bodies were almost touching. "Would you be offended if I kissed you?"

She didn't answer but put her arms around him and initiated the kiss herself, a desire that surprised her again but one she didn't want to resist. She wanted to sample this man, to test and see if the attraction for him she'd been feeling all night would be proven true or false.

His kiss was gentle, taking nothing but giving everything, offering a taste of what the future might hold should she choose to pursue it. His arms held her close and she could feel the full swell of his arousal pressed against her, but she knew if she took a step back he'd let her go. She let herself melt into his embrace, welcoming him as well. She reached behind her, took his hand and moved it lower so he could feel her smooth and round yet firm rump.

He chuckled softly against her lips but did not remove his hand. Slowly, reluctantly, he ended the kiss. "You are lovely. Delicious. But I think I would prefer to sample and appreciate more of you later." The first strains of music began to waft through the air. "I would love to see you dance in that dress, watching your legs move across the ballroom floor before I see them wrapped around my waist," he whispered, his husky voice sending shivers of delight down her spine.

They'd both barely noticed the music had begun and the ball was underway.

Her laugh was throaty and sultry. "*As you wish.*" She gave him one more squeeze, an appreciative hug that also let her imagine what it might feel like pressed up against him, fae mask or no. Then she stepped back while letting her left hand trail down his shoulder to his right hand.

With an elegant, if perhaps a little bit naughty, bow, Vidre led Mizuko to the dance floor. He swept her into his arms even as they took their first steps, demonstrating he was a very capable dancer. Mizuko was a better dancer than the average, but her skill on the floor was a little less than his. However, the attractive disguised nymph always drew eyes more to her physical assets than what she was doing with them.

Less listened to Clare's whispered report of Vicissitude's attack on Mizuko. She asked him if she should tell anyone else but he shook his head and quickly broke off the conversation. He didn't want to draw attention to their meeting.

Seeing Veridia by the punch bowl he waved his cockroach antennae and walked jauntily over. He took a moment to tuck a small paper bag printed with a cartoon cat behind the table skirting. He tugged at his sleeves to better show off his cufflinks and gave Veridia a deep bow. "My queen, the goblin fruit punch is excellent, but nothing could be as sweet and light as your steps on the dance floor. In fact," he said as he divested her of her cup and led her towards the band, "it might actually be a crime of the ball for such a lady to be without a partner. I had better have you waltzing before I am dragged off by the Winter Formal Secret Police!"

Veridia smiled. "I had no idea you were such a flatterer, King Seleman."

Veridia was a precise and attentive dance partner. Less and she had been given some room and an audience as they danced, for the sight of a King and Queen dancing together was uncommon since the Queen of Spring and King of Summer had stopped courting. With so many eyes upon them, Septimus Snow was reluctant to interrupt his King, even with important news. Instead, he reflected carefully on potential resolutions, put them into play and allowed his King this enjoyable moment. Problem solving should come later when the solving of one problem would not merely lead to thornier issues due to poor timing. The pale Beast melted back into the crowd and went to deal with a little altercation that was occurring in an unmonitored room.

Richard and Rey stepped directly onto the dance floor and immediately into the dance. He led her around the other dancers, and while their steps may not have been the "right" ones, she knew they made a striking couple. It was more than their size difference, but how they moved together. Almost perfectly in tune. It helped, of course, that she was a Fairest and used it well, but it was also more than that. Their feelings for each other, their comfort at being in each other's personal space, created an intimacy even in the crowd.

This time, however, Rey did not want to be oblivious of what was going on around her. She kept one eye on the other dancers, watching for Mizuko and Less.

The Winter King was easy to spot, for a space had opened around he and Queen Veridia. They danced in their own private arena ringed by quietly applauding changelings and other guests.

She spotted Mizuko and the mysterious Vidre as well. They seemed to be getting along very well. Each seemed caught up in their own dancing and each other, they were paying little attention to the jealous looks other changeling were giving them. No doubt men and women alike were interested in one or the other of the handsome couple.

Rey was happy to see Mizuko was enjoying herself. Maybe Richard was right. Vidre might be the one to steer her away from Remy. A pleased little sigh escaped from her lips and she looked up at her dance partner.

#### *Unfortunate Amber*

Amber had one hell of a night. It started out well enough and she met a lot of fascinating people. The food was strange and wondrous, and when the music began she was fascinated by the amazing sound coming from a few, strange instruments.

The fun came to a crashing halt, however, when several, obviously irate changelings grabbed her by the scarf (it was wound around her throat decoratively), and shoved her roughly against a wall while they hurled accusations at her. She had no idea what was going on and she told them so. They accused her of being a liar, of insulting them and abusing the hospitality afforded by the event to do it.

Which was why they dragged her to an alcove out of sight. Things went from bad to worse when an ogre who voiced his rage. "I smell bad? You think I stink? You insensitive little bitch! You know I've been working on for months! And then to humiliate me in front of everyone like that?" Amber would have been speechless anyway, but the punch to her stomach that sent her to the floor took her breath away. It hurt so bad and she choked up blood. She couldn't get up.

Someone intervened. She wasn't sure who, because she could barely see through the tears. Alone and vulnerable to people who had real power, she felt utterly helpless. Her fate wasn't in her own hands and she regretted failing to listen to Mizuko's warnings about going off on her own.

She realized no one was kicking her at the moment. Someone was talking so she tried to pay attention. A deep voice — the ogre she supposed — said, "Someone posing at the Ghul, looking like her and wearing the very same scarf did us grievous insult at the Speed Motley Mating event, Septimus. It wasn't the Ghul. We asked her about it and she said she'd been with the Magister of Fear, Lydia, all night. Lydia confirmed it. But the Ghul had noticed someone else that looked a bit like her and wore the very same scarf. This is the one! We is just getting some satisfaction here."

Septimus looked carefully around. "Violence at the King's event is not the answer here. Some of you have been drinking. Perhaps your judgment is somewhat clouded. Beating this changeling is not going to change what she did."



"Naw, but it will make us feel better," said a wizened type that looked like he'd seen about thirty years of war.

"Besides," said a slender female changeling with the frighteningly efficient body of a mantis and a mantle of Autumn, "the Ghul's name was smeared here. This one doesn't even belong to a Court. There is no one we need deal with in order to give her what's coming to her."

"I spoke to the Ghul when I first become aware there was an issue," Septimus said soothingly. "She stated that since she had not herself caught this one in the act, she would refrain from demanding retribution. Now, as I see it, the only wrongs she committed were with a few words. She hurt nothing but your feelings. Surely you are all are not so thin-skinned as to be affected by the harmless pranks of a courtless changeling?" Septimus paused to look at each of them in turn.

"Now, the Unmasking is to occur in twenty minutes. I suggest you either return the party and try to enjoy the rest of your evening, or go home."

The small group looked at each other and grumbled, but it seemed their interest in a fight had faded. They dispersed and headed back to the great hall.

Septimus waited until they were gone, then stooped down to Amber.

"Now, young Amber, I do think we've learned a lesson tonight, have we not."

Amber looked up at him through her tears. She was still doubled over on her side on the floor.

Realizing she hadn't caught her breath yet, he continued. "You should stay near your changeling sponsor at events such as these." He picked her up and gently place her on her feet, letting her steady herself against him. "Now, the Unmasking is in twenty minutes. Shall we try to find your sponsor?"

Amber shook her head. "I just want to go home," she said weakly.

"Ah yes. Well then, I can escort you to back to your world. Can you handle things well enough from there?"

Amber nodded. "Will you please tell Mizuko Naia that I'm not feeling well so I went home? She can call me later if she wants."

"Ah yes. The Legate of Mists. I will see to it she is informed."

With Septimus' help, Amber slowly made her way down one of the long, empty halls of the great hollow until they reached a pair of colossal doors. Septimus opened them for her and she stepped into the chilly night air of Iron Mountain.

Unseen, Less collected the discarded scarf and tucked it into a paper bag.

—

Shortly before the last dance, Less excused himself from his partner and collected the paper bag from its hiding place. He found Mizuko resting from the vigorous dancing and showed her the bag.

"Mizuko," Less said. "This bag has been demanding me all evening that I release it from this world by fire. Would you mind?" He held it out to her by the handles.

Mizuko nodded, pleased at another opportunity to practice her new power. She took a small zippo out and

flicked it. A little flame burst from the sparks and she held it before her eyes for a moment of concentration. Then she put her fingers directly into the flame. Flames suddenly rushed up her arm to her elbow and stopped, burning with the punishing heat of blue-white flame. Less noted that it was so hot it actually felt horribly cold to be near.

The fiery nymph then took the bag from Less with the hand that wasn't burning, held it up and put her flaming hand underneath it. It burned in a flash, littering the floor with instant, grey ash. The her arm stopped burning suddenly.

"I like Zippos," Mizuko remarked in Glymjack Sign. "Anytime you need a problem resolved with fire let me know. I have discovered I can burn even bones to ash."

"Good work," said Less as he signaled a steward to sweep up the remains of the duplicate red-and-gold scarves.

—

The last dance ended, and Richard stooped, wrapped his arms around Rey and gave her a warm kiss as Midnight arrived and with it, the Unmasking. She returned it with pleasure, though not with the fervor she would have if they had been alone. She did not want to move from his arms, well aware of how rare such a display of affection was. She was unwilling to give up even a moment of it. The kiss lasted a long time, but it seems, never quite long enough. He drew away, his massive bovine head now in place of the ogre's grinning face. His big brown eyes looked down in amusement as he drew back to his full height.

Rey couldn't help but laugh softly and say "What?"

"Just you," he said. "I get a bit of a kick out of your reactions sometimes."

A bemused, affectionate smile lit Rey's face. "What can I say? Sometimes actions are a far better way to convey what I feel."

—

Everywhere around the ball room, kiths faded and were replaced by the changelings' true selves. Gentlefolk put their masks aside amid must amusement and occasional gasps of surprise.

Mizuko barely noticed her own disguise fade as she removed her own home-made mask and watched with fixed attention on her dance partner. He smiled, and obsidian paled to shimmering finely scaled flesh, Caribbean blue hair and eyes with mirrored irises. Mizuko made a delighted sound and smiled widely. Her delight at seeing him was written all over her face but she wasn't ready to let go of her charming new find, which sign language would require.

He lifted her hand from his arm and placed another kiss on his fingers, this time somewhat more intimate than the one he'd given her earlier. "Greetings, Mizuko Naia. Now that the masquerade portion of the evening is over, I shall introduce myself to you properly. I am called Drake Mari."

She remembered him very well from the bug hunt. She left her hand in his and touched the skin of his face with the other, wondering at the enchanting, shimmering effect of his skin. "Drake," she said wonderingly. "*The handsome swordsman. So you've seen my legs dance. Is this the part where there is sampling and appreciating?*"

"Perhaps," he replied with a slight grin. "But not, I think, a suitable time or place. You did not come here alone tonight." It was definitely a statement, not a question.

She took her hands back and signed, "I'm glad you reminded me." She looked around the immediate vicinity. "I'm really worried about her. She is an independent girl, but I don't think she'd have disappeared the entire night like this on purpose. I need to find her."

"Let's get to work, then."

—

The Autumn Queen had worn no false kith but only a mask that really did little to hide her identity since her dark crown was omnipresent. But she removed it and stepped back to admire the return of Less's true self. Less dismissed his false seeming. His large, magnificent compound eyes vanished leaving nothing but pale, smooth skin below his forehead. His multitude of other eyes flickered open. With his distinctive muffled speech from the mouths covered by clothing he thanked Veridia for the dance.

Veridia returned the thanks, then casually asked, "You make me wonder, Winter King, what all those eyes of yours really see." She smiled, bowed her head to him, and glided away.

Septimus discretely appeared at his King's elbow. "Sire, I think you should know there was something of an ... altercation here tonight. It seems someone impersonated the Ghul of Autumn and made some rather disparaging remarks to a number of persons."

"Oh? And this wasn't some misdirection by the Ghul herself?"

"The evidence points to a mortal named Amber, guest of Mizuko Naia. The injured parties beat her, as likely she deserved for such a prank. Quite a lot of gall for a mortal, if you ask me. She left early after I defused the situation. She asked that her sponsor be informed she went home, which of course I shall do momentarily. I wanted to report this to you in case you wished to speak with Miss Naia about the virtues of taking a firmer hand on ones ensorcelled mortals when they are among our kind. I can do so instead, if you like."

"No, I shall talk to her myself. It was probably a misunderstanding. I am more disappointed in the decorum of our changelings. Resorting to beatings?"

Septimus remarked, "This foolish young Amber, a teenager I believe, is fortunate the offended changelings did not know this she was not a changeling. They assumed her courtless and therefore open game for taking their revenge."

"Still, it was not very generous. She was here under our hospitality and deserved more. Thank you for intervening."

Less disengaged himself from Septimus and took the stage once more. "Friends, thank you all for coming tonight. It has been a marvellous evening and I believe we celebrated our fallen comrades in proper changeling fashion. The Court Regents will retire for the night but I invite the rest of you to stay and enjoy yourselves. The band is packing up to make way for a DJ. Rock the mountain!"

—

As the after-party party started up, Mizuko wandered the main floor looking into every nook and cranny she could find, but still had no luck finding Amber. Her expression grew desperate as she began to question random people if they'd seen a teenage mortal girl with red hair and a black dress, but no one had.

As Less was saying his goodbyes, he was informed of Mizuko's search. He found the girl and her companion and told them about Amber. "There was some kind of misunderstanding and had an altercation with some changelings. She went home. I'm leaving now so I can check on her if you want to stay."

Mizuko shook her head. "*No, I have to go. She's important to me.*" She turned to Drake and switched to ASL. "Drake, I'm sorry. I did very much enjoy spending time with you tonight, but she needs me. I need to find out what the problem was and correct it. Will you call me?" She gave him her number.

Drake nodded. "Can I give you a lift somewhere?" he signed.

Mizuko nodded in return and smiled her appreciation.

"May I come along?" asked Less. "I'd like to have the opportunity to tell Amber that I will be following up on those changelings that so abused my hospitality."

Mizuko nodded an affirmative but looked to Drake to see if it was okay.

"No problem," Drake replied aloud. "My car is down in one of the lots of the park."

"There you are," Rey said as she and Richard joined the others. "I was hoping to see you before you left." Her eyes fell on Drake and she smiled. "Hello again."

"Good evening Paladin of Shadows, Witch Lafitte," Drake replied. "I am pleased to see you're not suffering any ill effects from our little adventure in the Hedge a few days ago." He gave Rey a little smile. "I did not have the chance to introduce myself then. I am Drake Mari, of the Summer Court."

Mizuko added in Glymjack Sign, "We are going to go find Amber. Less says there was some kind of misunderstanding and a fight."

Richard looked back and forth between them, wondering what they were talking about. Drake didn't recognize the signs either.

"Mizuko's friend Amber got into a bit of trouble, and that she and Drake are going to go look for her," Rey said for the benefit of Drake and Richard. "Richard and I are going to be heading to my place shortly. I'll let you know if she's there." She didn't know much about Amber or where she liked to hang out, so offering to help didn't make much sense to her.

Mizuko nodded and squeezed Rey's arm in gratitude. Worry was written all over her face when she turned back to Drake and Less. She took the time to impart Drake her address and then waited for Drake to lead her to his car.

After wishing the searchers good luck, she looked up at Richard. "Would you mind if we find Lydia before we leave? There's something I'd like to ask her, and it'll only take a minute."

"I saw her near the coat room. I think we can still catch her," Richard said.

They made their way there and found Lydia pulling on a heavy cloak. When she noticed their approach, she finished and turned to them.

"Good evening, Magister. Might I have just a moment of your time?"

She nodded curtly. "Of course."

"I wonder if we might get together for coffee or something in a few days. I have some information I'd like to share with you."

"There is some research I'm heavily involved with at the moment, but I'll be here Sunday afternoon. I'd be happy to hear what you have then — unless it's something you can discuss now," Lydia replied.

"It would take more than a few minutes, I'm afraid," Rey said regretfully. She debated for a moment about mentioning the need for props, but decided that might not be prudent.

Sunday was three days away, but Lydia got the impression this might be a pressing issue. "If it's important I could make time. When do you think you will be ready?"

Rey quickly thought about what she needed to finish up. She could always cut out of work early if she needed to. Her boss certainly wouldn't care. "Tomorrow afternoon, about three."

"Are you working?"

"I will be," Rey replied with a nod.

"I'll stop by your casino. The lounge on the ground level," Lydia stated.

"I appreciate it. If you're there before I am, let them know you're meeting me," Rey added, planning to pick up the tab for any drinks they may have.

Lydia smiled. "See you tomorrow, Witch Lafitte."

*Later, on the way to Mizuko's apartment*

While Drake drove to the expensive apartment building, Mizuko pulled up her phone and called home. It took her a couple tries because she misdialled once and the screen still wasn't working right since the explosion in the Hedge during the Brainbug encounter.

Amber picked up on the fourth ring and gave the standard greeting. Mizuko could tell Amber didn't sound like her usual self. "*It's me. I'm coming home, okay? Are you all right?*"

Mizuko listened for a while. "*Okay, try to calm down. I'll be there in a few minutes.*" She closed the phone, then sighed and rubbed her head.

"Is she going to be alright?" Drake asked.

Since Drake needed to keep his eyes on the road, Mizuko restricted herself to using her voice, despite the fact it was probably just as distracting as trying to watch her sign while driving. "*She's upset, and I think she's really hurt. She said an ogre punched her in the stomach and she was kicked, too. She said she was accused of saying hurtful things to other changelings and they were crazy mad about it. That the one who did it looked like her and wore the same scarf.*"

Mizuko explained, "*She got that scarf as a gift. We don't know who it was from but she liked it and wanted to wear it to the Formal. I should never have let her out of my sight.*"

"If it's alright with you," Drake said, "I'll come up to your apartment with you. If she needs medical attention, I can drive the two of you where you need to go."

"*I really appreciate that, Drake. I don't have a car anymore so it might really help.*"

"It's no problem." He shrugged. "Everybody could use a hand now and then."

Less had wanted Amber to himself and now there was a crowd of three. "I feel bad about what happened. Tonight was supposed to be a magical, exotic evening. Let's take her to the Goblin Market and sell her memories of the ball. We could buy her some nice memories."

"Oh!" Mizuko exclaimed. "*We could do that, couldn't we?*"

"I hope that was meant as a joke," Drake said dryly.

Mizuko looked uncertain. She cast a glance at Less.

"Well, you wouldn't have to live with Amber blaming you for what happened," suggested Less. "*And not feel guilty about the wonderful night you and Drake spent together. You're not a complete innocent in this either, Drake,* thought Less.

Mizuko suddenly felt a pang of guilt that was more than just about not finding Amber sooner. She slouched in her seat and stared at her lap. "Well," she said, "*if Amber wants to do that, I'll pay for it. She wouldn't have been in that situation if I hadn't let her come with me tonight, so it's my fault she got beat up. She's just a kid in a lot of ways, you know?*"

"It's not entirely your fault, Mizuko," Less said quietly. "There were extenuating circumstances. Drake paid for the privilege of being with you for the evening. It was distracting."

Mizuko sighed, unconvinced. She felt miserable about it. She leaned her head on the glass of the window. She'd told Amber about the risks, about not wandering off alone, but now she realized she'd been a fool to think that Amber would understand the danger she might be in that way. Amber needed experience to learn this stuff, just as Mizuko had. But Mizuko hadn't been there.

She reflected on the fact that Amber was the last surviving mortal friend she had left, how Amber always watched out for the both of them with the money, getting food and clothes. Amber was the one that was always around when Mizuko needed her and got out of the way when Mizuko didn't need her.

Mizuko was still thinking about it when they rolled into the apartment building's parking lot. She led the small group past security. The elderly security man, whom she had always liked gave her a chipper account of the progress the repair crew was making in her apartment, but she was inattentive. He frowned as she passed by.

She led them up the elevator to the eleventh floor and down a wide hall to her apartment, then let them all in with her key. The place looked like a war zone that had been cleaned up. The damage was still there but broken glass was gone, smashed sliding doors were boarded up and the smelly slime cleaned up.

Amber lay on her side on the couch. She looked at Mizuko, then all the others. She pushed herself to the end of the couch and propped herself up. It was hard to miss the fear in her eyes. It stopped Mizuko in her tracks. She signed in ASL. "They aren't going to hurt you. They were concerned."

Drake lowered himself to the ground so he knelt, putting him at Amber's eye level. "I'm the one who made the winning bid in the date auction for Mizuko. I know a bit of first aid. May I come closer and see how you are doing?" he signed.

She studied him while trying to decide if she trusted him that close to her.

"You might be badly hurt worse than you think, Amber," Drake signed.

Amber nodded. She already discarded the dress she was wearing and was clad in sweats. She lifted her shirt up to her bra so Drake could see. There was a huge, ugly bruise just under her ribs as well as some purple

marks along the left side of her ribs.

She stayed mostly still as Drake examined them, twitching only when he had to touch and probe to see if ribs were broken. His best guess was that nothing was broken as far as ribs. But internal injuries were tricky. Maybe she was fine, just bruised and her pride hurt. But if there was internal bleeding she might not know it until it was too late.

"It doesn't look like anything's broken," he said, "but I think you might have internal injuries. You need to get checked out. I have some friends at the urgent care clinic. They'll help, no questions asked."

Amber pulled her shirt down. "I don't have money."

"The clinic helps people without money all the time. But how about this," Drake said. "Tell me you won't forget what happened tonight and that you've learned from the experience, and that will be payment enough."

Mizuko gave him a mildly surprised look, but didn't say anything.

"Yeah. Stay with Mizuko when around other changelings. Avoid them if I'm alone. I got it," Amber said somberly.

Drake nodded. "I hope the events at the end of the evening didn't completely erase the memories of the fun you did have."

Amber didn't reply.

"I don't know a lot about medicine," said Less. "But what can a clinic do about internal injuries? Seems like we should take her to the hospital or the Market."

"It's an urgent care clinic," Drake replied patiently. "They can take x-rays, and they even have an MRI machine." He signed quickly to Mizuko "The hospital will insist on filing a police report, and taking her to the Market is a very bad idea. Do you really want to expose your friend to that, after what just happened?"

Mizuko looked troubled, but shook her head. "Clinic," she signed. She bent near Amber, then picked her up.

They went with Drake to the clinic he spoke of and got her the attention she needed. They didn't find anything immediately but asked that she be watched and if she showed any signs of anemia, blood in the stool, that sort of thing, then she needed to get to a hospital right away. The folks at clinic supplied here with some strong ibuprofen and sent her back home.

—

Rey and Richard returned to her home and continued their own celebration of Valentine's Day. She shed her gown and slowly removed everything else she wore while he watched, She didn't do a striptease or anything; just chatted with him about the encounter with the brainbugs. When she was finally down to just her skin, she put on the necklace he'd given her. Rey didn't need to look at herself in the mirror to see how she looked. She saw it in Richard's eyes and his body language.

After a light snack, Rey took him to her bed when he wore only the bracer she'd given him. Their love that night was an adoration of each other, starting slow and sweet and ending powerful and deep with whispered declarations before they were carried off into sleep. Rey's dreams were briefly marred with a nightmare, but she was soothed back into peaceful rest by Richard.

She awoke before her alarm to find him watching her sleep and it delighted her. Not the fact she was being

observed, but just his presence there. It had been so long since she'd woken up next to someone, she admitted, and she'd forgotten how nice it was. Another surprise for her was Hamilton's presence in the bed with them. He was happily curled up by Rey's feet and promptly insinuated himself between Rey and Richard for some attention.

They shared an easy familiarity that morning, getting dressed and having breakfast together, with Hamilton making approving comments about how much more pleasant and civilized Rey's new mate was. She just rolled her eyes and distracted him with a saucer of cream.

When the time came for them to go their separate ways, Richard and Rey said goodbye with a long, lingering kiss and murmurs about the possibility of coffee on Sunday.

Rey's work day went surprisingly well. There were fewer than the usual problems expected for Valentine's Day, and she dealt with her end of them quickly. On her brief lunch break, she put the finishing touches on the pictures for Lydia, then ran copies of them. She tucked one set inside a manilla envelope, and another set in her desk. She knew that if anyone happened to see them they'd think she was just drawing some creepy fictional monsters.

At three, she walked into the Riverboat Lounge to find Lydia already there in a booth with a drink on the table in front of her. Rey slid into the seat across from her and, after some brief pleasantries, gave Lydia the envelope. As the other woman looked at them, Rey told Lydia about what had happened, from finding the brainbugs in Mizuko's apartment, to tracking down and destroying the ones they found in the Hedge. Rey told Lydia to keep the pictures, and that she wanted to make sure people were on the look out for these things, in case some had gotten away, or another infestation was forming in the Duchy.

Lydia had some questions of her own, and Rey answered them as best she could. Rey hadn't been able to figure out how they got into the apartment, and the video footage from the security cameras in the hallway had been corrupted. That was both good and bad, as while it meant there was no evidence of Rey, Mizuko and Amber going in and out of the apartment before and after the explosion in the bathtub, there was no evidence as to how the things may have gotten into the apartment. The fact they'd been in Mizuko's apartment and, apparently, only that apartment was very worrying. Was Mizuko the target, or was Amber, and why?