

Less spent a lot of the time following the re-capture of the *Eochair Dubh* re-establishing the network of the Wardens. It had fallen into a bit of disorder in his absence. This brought him close to Claire again, and their easy, teasing working relationship was once again a comfort to him. Her extreme competence was easy to like. Nothing was said about her offer of companionship at the midsummer festival but Less hadn't forgotten about it. He was still without a heart, however, and without Niveanne a constant presence to tug on the astral strings that tied him with his Keeper he reverted back to his emotionally-blocked elemental nature. Unfortunately, his nature was also driven by suspicion. Claire's sudden and unexpected proposition made him wonder if the witches of Ishtar had somehow infected her brain. Ishtar had made it very clear that she had been aware of his spy. Was this some form of punishment? He vowed to find out - and until then Claire would be restricted in her security clearance within the Bleak Seal.

One of his duties as Constable was providing identities for new changelings. He put a lot of work into some forged documents for Imogen. She wouldn't be able to use them to cross the border but she could carry on a fairly normal life within Mythic City. She was able to move out of Less' small apartment and concentrate on re-building her cabin in the mountains.

With the Gates of Arcadia closed, his Hollow was once more safe to enter. His smuggling contacts at the far side of his many Doors were impatient from his prolonged absence. Some of this could be smoothed over with a few baubles from the Dragon's hoard, which had been waiting for him to sort and catalogue. The sole items that had been disturbed had been the moped (which he now used to get around town when the bus or train would not suffice) and the golden armour. He had presented the armour to Jeremiah Storm, Summer King, during the midsummer festival for his Court's tireless efforts fighting the effects of the Black Gates being opened.

One of his most important activities during the peaceful months following the closing of the Gates, however, had been sleep. Oh, how he relished a night without the Ice Queen's terrifying messages, Mira's vampyric nightmares and Niveanne's dangerous games. He slept and he dreamed. Such dreams...

A few months ago, Mira had left her job at Corazons because it was a nighttime-only kind of position. That left her unable to spend a lot of time with Drake. She'd drift about aimlessly all day while Drake was working or at school and then when he was available, she'd be waitressing until late. She also knew she would never make for a great waitress. It just didn't suit her skills (or poor ability to remember orders and who ordered them). She'd also grown tired of being the target of wandering hands. Because it was bothering her, it then became something Drake didn't like, either.

When she contacted Annabeth Milogie and asked if she might have work available that was primarily days and that paid cash, Annabeth had a several options open. Some would have Mira out in public working with people, and the other would be more behind the

scenes. It was decided that behind the scenes was better and Mira started work at Salta. This was a dance club not far from Corazons that was open mostly at night, but needed someone to take care of stocking, cleaning and general preparation. Annabeth offered a pay in cash that to Mira was very generous.

Later that summer, Rey asked if she would be interested in taking up the mantle of Ranger of Thorns. The Autumn Court needed its scout in the Hedge and Mira was used to scouring some of the near areas looking for goblin fruits. After only a little thought, Mira had enthusiastically accepted. The Black Council approved the appointment without a fuss, along with several others that Rey made in order to fill vacant but important position in the Autumn Court.

Understanding a little more about the Breaches and where they led was an important part of the Ranger's job. Mira treated the task with diligence and caution, asking for help where the danger seemed great. By prioritizing what was looked at according to level of rumored or observed activity, she was able to do the most important work without it consuming her life.

Rey sat back in her high-backed leather chair and grimaced at the pile of paperwork sitting in her inbox. She'd almost gotten it cleared out when her assistant came in and filled it back up again with new reports, requests and a myriad of other things that needed her attention.

She sighed, and as she reached for the basket to look through it, her cell phone rang. "Saved by the bell," she muttered, wondering who would be calling her. The frown on her face turned into a smile when she recognized the phone number on the display.

"Hello, Chase." The pleasure of hearing from him rang loud and clear in her voice. Over the past six months, she'd gotten to looking forward to seeing each month, even if it was just for lunch or dinner and the renewal of their pledge. It got her out of the house and office and reminded her she did have a life outside of work and her duties as Queen Lafitte.

"Hi Rey," Chase said amiably. "Are you busy?"

"Not any more," she replied with a chuckle, and smiled as she felt the little rush of Glamour she got from his greeting. "You saved me from starting in on a new pile of paperwork that just appeared on my desk. What's up?"

"That Breach thing actually," he said a little nonchalantly.

"Oh." The sudden disappointment that it wasn't a social call was almost balanced out by the thought his calling her about this was a good thing. And that his almost too carefree attitude could mean it was something he was uncomfortable about. "This sounds like

something better suited to a face to face conversation," she said, all businesslike again. "I can be at your apartment in about half an hour."

"I'm sure Kiera would enjoy your company, but I'm not at home. That's one of the reasons I called. I think the Breach is bigger and there are more of those wolf-things running around. That would be bad enough, but I'm out on a bounty now and can't deal with it." He sounded apologetic. "Gotta pay the bills, you know."

"No problem," she replied with the vaguest bit of unease. "You be careful, okay? And are we still on for dinner on Friday?" They'd made arrangements to meet to renew the pledge that night, as they did every month. Sometimes it was a meal, other times just a coffee and a brief chat. She'd come to look forward to those little get togethers, and she enjoyed the casual flirtation and even the "I just can't help it" touches didn't bother her as they did before. She wasn't afraid of what he could bring out in her anymore.

"Yes, I'll see you Friday. If something comes up I'll let you know," he said.

"Appreciate it," Rey said. "Talk to you soon."

The Breach getting larger, she thought. That cannot be good. She quickly called Mira and Less to ask them to meet her, then called Doctor Tom to tell him they were going to investigate one of the Breaches. She did not expect him to come with, but she wanted him to know so he could be prepared if things went cock-eyed and they'd need his services.

Less arrived armed with the net-gun. He had found it in his Hollow while tidying up and felt it might be useful.

Mira arrived by taxi, not long after. She'd brought just a level head, a light heart and a small duffel of spare clothes. She was dressed appropriately for walking through the fancy casino Rey managed in the early evening. The little blue-green dress she wore helped her blend in. The duffel contained a change of clothes.

"Chase called me," Rey told them. "He's been keeping an eye on the Breach over by the Belle Park apartments, and he told me there's a problem. More briar wolves have been showing up, and he thinks the Breach is getting bigger."

"Getting bigger!?" exclaimed Less. "Something serious must be happening in the Hedge there. If anything, the Breaches should be gradually shrinking."

"My thoughts exactly," Rey says. "This isn't something Chase can handle himself, and heading into the Breach isn't something he's equipped to do. I told him we'd look into it."

"*I definitely need to get in there,*" Mira said, referring to her new post as Ranger of Thorns. "*Take a look around.*" She dug in her duffel and pulled out a little notebook she kept on what she'd managed to scout so far. "*I hadn't received reports of problems on this one*

yet." She flipped through her notes. *"Oh, here's something."* She read her own notes out loud. *"After Queen Lafitte mentioned there was a Breach that Chase was monitoring, I went down to his neighborhood -- actually only about a block away from the Winter King's home as well -- and met him for coffee. He mentioned only the occasional briar wolf sighting and said that he had an advantage granted him by the Queen to help him deal with things there. I have concluded that this Breach is especially closely monitored by the Queen's ally and moved on to bigger problems."*

Mira closed her book and looked at the other two. *"But clearly things change. Since there hasn't been a string of attacks that we know of, Chase has probably given us a pretty timely warning."*

"Chase has been dealing with anything that decides to make trouble," Rey offered. "He's claimed it as his turf, so he considers the briar wolves as trespassers, and has been dealing with accordingly."

"That's really good news," Mira said. *"I don't know a lot about werewolves, but I do know that once they've decided something is 'theres' they'll go through a hell of a lot of trouble to keep it the way they want it. And since he's basically asked for help, that gives us room to do what we need to get it done."*

"So we expect a pack of Briarwolves, at least," said Less. "Anything anyone wants to mention about them before they start snapping at our necks?"

"They won't snap at our necks," Rey replied calmly, almost casually. "They go after your arms and legs, little nips at first. Just enough to make you bleed and scared, and chase you through the Hedge, especially the thorns. They love terrifying their prey almost as much as they love killing. They hunt in packs, and when you're being hunted, you'll almost never see them. You'll hear them. Their howls can make even the most hardened Autumn courtier's hair stand up on end. They're highly territorial, and will kill for pleasure." She looked at Less and Mira. "Anything else you want to know?"

"Weaknesses?" prompted Mira.

"Other than cold wrought iron," Rey said, "none that I know of."

"You said they love terrifying victims. Do they feed on fear?"

"They can," Rey replied. "With a preference for for, desperation and pain."

"So we should do our best to stand our ground if we encounter them," said Less. "Are we going now?"

"That was the plan," Rey said. "Unless there is something you need to do first?"

He longed to return to some people's dreams but he could put that aside for the time

being. "No. Let's find out what's going on."

"Yes. *I need to use your bathroom.*" After Rey pointed the way, she paused, feeling their eyes on her, and turned back with a sigh. "No, *I don't suddenly have to pee, guys. I'm just going to change. I didn't know what the meeting was going to be about or how to dress for it. But I brought spares.*"

"Sorry about that. From now on, if it's something official," Rey said, "I'll let you know. This isn't official court or Duchy business. It's motley business. Chase is my personal ally, not someone I have a deal with to benefit my Court or the Duchy as a whole."

Rey drove them all to the apartment building in her new car, and found a parking spot on the street nearby. Normally, she would have used the lot a block away, but she thought it was best to have the car nearby in case someone was hurt.

Mira remembered the street being busier before, but now it was practically empty, especially surprising give the time of day. Those few people out and about hurried down the sidewalks to their destinations, not wanting to be exposed any more than they had to, though they didn't know why.

It wasn't difficult to find the Breach; thick, gnarled roots extended from it and drilled down through the pavement to the earth below. The forest the Breach opened into hadn't changed, and it still exuded the hateful, angry intensity as before. As the motley got closer, Mira realized the tree roots had grown, and were at her best guess, about two feet further into this world from the Hedge.

Frowning, she pointed that fact out to her companions. "*If I were to guess, something is making this happen. What, I don't know, but I think it will be dangerous to try to find it until we chase away or eliminate the briar wolves around here. By people's reactions, I'd say they've been preying on the locals, too.*"

Now that they were face to face with the Breach, Less was nervous about facing a pack of briarwolves with just the three of them. He put on a brave face and shook awake all of his eyes to watch for danger. He slowly approached the Breach, examining the forest for signs of the pack or other Hedge creatures.

"*I have an idea,*" Mira said softly. Her voice still managed to make her friends jump when she spoke unexpectedly. "*What if we use our ability to manipulate the Hedge a little bit, to force the plants further back into the breach? That might call out the briar wolves and maybe stop this from expanding.*"

Less stopped and propped his netgun on his shoulder. "That's worth a try," he said. He extended his Winter aura towards the tree nearest to him. Rime covered the trunk of the tree, and the bushes near Mira turned from the green of deep summer to the golds and reds of autumn, but none of the plants showed any signs of retreating from the world and back into the Hedge.

She gave Less a wry smile. *"Well. I never said it was a great idea."*

"Well, let's go," said Less. "I don't see any evidence of Hedge creatures here. The growth is too new."

"Go where," Rey asked softly. She stood off to one side, looking at the new growth, and then gazing deeper into the Breach.

"Into the Breach," Less suggested. "To find the briarwolves and to find out why the Breach is expanding." He moved closer to the entrance to the Breach and examined the two paths that lead deeper into the Hedge, and the one on the right had two branches before it disappears around a bend and just out of sight. There were a number of different tracks, but they were all mixed together and obscured by mud and other debris - he couldn't identify any of them, or even hazard a guess at how many different individuals may have passed this way.

Less shook his head. "There's been a lot of traffic but no way to determine which path might be the one we want. Let's take the left one." It presented them with less decisions - at least from this vantage point.

Mira knew her way around some of the local Hedge, but Less knew it at least as well if not better. Plus, she knew he had a sharp instinct for these things, a cunning she couldn't match. She deferred to his choice. *"Left it is, then. I'll lead off but you can decide where we go when it's needed."* More to herself than anything, she added, *"We'll have to keep the world in site and not get too deep or we'll be helpless if when the briarwolves cut us off..."*

Less stepped in after Mira on the path. He kept all his eyes alert for danger and kept his net-gun at the ready. Rey took up the rear, keeping an eye on the area around them, and making sure the alley beyond the breach in sight.

Mira and Less moved ahead, and the area around them was eerily quiet. The left-hand path curved away from the breach and the other path. For a moment, Mira heard wind chimes, and then, further down the path and almost out of sight she thought she saw a small cottage, but she couldn't be sure.

"Cottages are always promising," said Less quietly. At least the path didn't lead deep into a swamp.

"I'm not sure Hansel and Gretel would agree," Mira said. She paused, taking a careful look around. She could see many tracks on the path around her, but couldn't see a path leading to the cottage branching off yet. Cautiously, Mira approached slowly, glancing back often to make sure her friends were in sight as well as the way out of this briar.

"I mean that we've come here looking for a reason the Breach is expanding," replied Less.

"Finding a cottage is fortuitous considering we could be wandering aimlessly in the Thorns."

Mira let out a breath and tried to relax. *"You are probably right. We don't live in a fairy tale, this is reality. A cottage means habitation and habitation might mean someone has seen something to do with those briar wolves and the Breach. Come on. Let's get to the cottage and pay whoever lives there a visit."*

"I can't come with you," Rey said. "If I go any further, I'll lose sight of the Breach."

Less considered their options. The Hedge was always tempting people to delve deeper and deeper, to get lost forever. But here was a definite landmark with a well-defined path. The risk to losing it from spending a few minutes inside was low. To stop now was safer, for sure, but not what they came here for. An expanding Breach was worth some risk. "I'd rather not leave you here by yourself if we go to investigate," he said to Rey. To Mira he said, "Try and see if you can catch someone's attention inside. If they come to us we won't need to lose sight of the Breach."

Mira nodded. *"Yes. I'll keep you in sight as I get closer. If I can see you, you can see Rey, and she can see the way out, we should be okay."* She moved ahead and approached the cottage.

A bit further down the path she was on, she found a smaller off-shoot that appeared to wend its way toward the cottage. It did not appear to be as well traveled as the main path, though. The closer Mira got to the cottage, the more she noticed a change in the feel of the place. The deep rooted anger and hatred of the forest gave way to peace and calm.

Once she could see the cottage, she realized it was what a little German cottage in the Black Forest might look like, complete with ornamental shutters. The doors and windows were closed, but a thin trail of smoke rose out of the chimney.

Nervous, Mira turned to look back toward Less to be sure he was still in sight. She could barely see him - or at least she thought she saw his left arm.

Mira's heart leaped into her throat. "Less?" she called out. She looked from the cottage back along the route she thought she'd taken, but was well aware of the tricks the Hedge could play. She might look away for only a moment, and the Hedge could close in on her -- especially if it was being manipulated by something powerful. She knew this, and as Ranger for Autumn she'd always been so careful to avoid this kind of situation. But she'd been with her motley. Too late, she recognized the arrogance, the pride in thinking that the motley together could overcome anything. They always had.

"Less!" she shouted in rising desperation, afraid to take another step in any direction.

"I can hear you, Mira!" shouted Less. He didn't want her emotions to attract the Hedge's attention. "Don't worry, everything's fine. Just follow the path back to me and we can

regroup."

Relief flooded her. She looked at the cottage. *"I think I can make it to the cottage. Just... don't move!"*

"Okay," he shouted back. "Just keep talking." He relayed this back to Rey.

Mira moved further down the path toward the cottage. As more of it came into view, it looked like something out of the Black Forest, with fancy woodwork and a white stucco-like exterior. The front door was closed and the windows shuttered, but a plume of smoke floated from the chimney.

Mira approached the front door. *"Hello?"* she said, thinking the cottage occupied. *"Is anybody home?"*

A moment later, the door opened to reveal a young woman whose beauty rivaled Mira's. She wore a simple green dress, covered with an apron dotted with flour, and a smudge of the white powder clung to the right side of her nose. "Hello," the woman said, her voice soft and melodious. "Are you lost?"

Mira looked at her with interest. *"No, miss. I believe I am exactly where I need to be. May I impose on your time for a few moments?"* Mira presented the most polite front she knew. If this young woman was a permanent resident of the hedge, then she was possibly not at all what she appeared to be. At best she thought she might be able to trade for information. At worst, she'd just walked into a trap. She tried not to think that way, though.

"Won't you come in?" the woman asked. "I'm in the midst of baking and the pies need to get into the oven."

"I could not impose on you; you are clearly busy and I came unannounced. I wish only to know if you may have noticed briar wolves in the area?"

"I have," the woman replied with a nod. "From time to time. But they stay away from my home, and do not bother me."

"Have there been more of them lately than usual?"

The woman shrugged, then shook her head. "I can't say."

"I see. Have you noticed the breach through the Hedge nearby?"

Mira caught the scent of something burning.

"Oh dear, my pies!" A look of dismay crossed the woman's face. "Are you sure you won't come in? We can continue to talk while I finish baking." She took a step back, obviously wanting to rescue her baked goods, but at the same time wanting to help Mira.

With a sympathetic frown, Mira nodded. *"It's only fair since I've caused you distraction."*

A bright smile danced on the woman's lips as she backed away from the door to give Mira room to enter.

The interior of the cottage was lit by what looked like an old-fashioned lanterns, and it was a large, one room affair, with what looked like a ladder going up to a sleeping loft. The "living room" area was furnished by a homey, very comfortable looking collection of mismatched furniture on an old and worn rug. The other half of the main floor was dominated by the kitchen.

Slightly off-center in the kitchen was a large sturdy table currently covered with baking ingredients and a number of both finished and unbaked pies. There were two brick ovens set into the wall, one large enough to put someone Mira's size in, the other smaller, and that was the one the woman was taking the pies out of.

The woman made a small noise of distress at the scorched spots on the edges of the pies. "Well, maybe I can cut the burnt parts off and nobody might notice."

"Are you expecting company?"

"Company?" The woman shook her head. "No, not really. I always bake in large batches, and I have a larder that keeps them nice and cool for quite a while. There's meat pies and fruit pies..." She gave Mira an embarrassed little smile. "I guess you could say I really like pie."

Mira watched her warily as the woman fixed up her pies. *"I can understand. I like pies, too. About the breach in the Hedge. Do you know of it?"*

"You are asking many questions," the woman said, looking at Mira as she trimmed the burnt bits off her pies.

Mira nodded. *"May we trade question for question? If you will give me a true answer, then I will give you a true answer to yours."*

The woman thought for a moment, then nodded. "To answer your question about the breach, I do know of it. Who are you to be asking these questions?"

"My name is Mira, and I have been asked by a friend to look into why the breach has grown larger recently. Can you tell me why?"

"No, I can't," the woman replied with a sad shake of her head. "Why are you worried about the briarwolves?"

"They have been using the breach to hunt in the mortal world." That was bad enough to

Mira, but she worried the woman might not understand why that's a concern, so she presented another thought. *"It's drawing attention from dangerous things. I have just one more question, if I may have your indulgence. Is there anyone else around here that may offer me the answers I seek?"*

"I do not believe so," the woman said. "How much is stopping the spread of the breach worth to you?"

Mira considered the woman carefully. *"If such a thing were offered for trade, I would have to know the asking price because I have not yet considered it's worth to me."*

The woman shrugged. "The expansion of the breach might stop on its own, or it might continue to expand, and swallow up the area around it." She picked up a pie and put it in the smaller oven. "That doesn't sound very good to me."

"That's true." She watched the woman a moment, then asked, *"Can you stop the spread of the breach?"*

"I cannot," the woman replied. "But I may know how it can be done."

"Will you tell me?"

"For a price."

"What is your price?"

"A bracken pearl," the woman said.

Mira was puzzled. *"I've never heard of that kind of pearl."*

"You can find them deep in the heart of this forest," the woman said. "At the bottom of a ravine filled with bracken whose thorns are longer than your hand."

"If I come across such a pearl, I'm sure I will bring it to you. But should fortune not be so kind, may I entice you with something else? Sometimes great value might be found in a simple pleasures shared." Mira decided to wait and see if the idea seemed to please her host or not before she suggested what she meant.

"I have all I need or want here," the woman replied. "What do you think you have to offer that I may value?"

"A bit of company, a song you haven't heard and that no one else ever will, a story of adventure and romance or tragedy?"

The woman considered the idea for a moment, then shook her head. "Those things do have value, it is true, but the bracken pearl is the price of my assistance."

"Very well. Should I happen upon the pearl I may return to visit again," Mira said. "Thank you for your time."

The woman's hand caressed the handle to the large oven. "May I offer you something to sustain you on your journey?" she asked.

"I am sure I have overstayed my welcome and my friends await." Mira replied politely. Edging away, she calmly found her way to the door, maintaining a courteous smile. When she found the handle, she bade her hostess, "Until we meet again, farewell." Then she slipped away through the door and tried to pick her way back from whence she came.

Less was sure he heard the cottage door close, but Mira hadn't kept in voice contact with him as he had asked. Frustrated and angry, he made a 'what the hell is going on?' gesture and stomped back along the path to Rey. "Mira's gone off by herself again," he told her. "I'm sure she went into the cottage alone."

"Well, go find find her," Rey said. "I'll stay here and keep the breach in sight."

Less wasn't sure that leaving Rey alone was a good idea considering the risk of briarwolves, but if she stayed within sight of the Breach she would at least have an escape route. "Okay, stay safe. I'm sure we're close enough to Mythic here that I can find my way back from the cottage." With that he turned and confidently strode along the path to the cottage.

When he got to where the smaller path branched off to head to the cottage, the problem was, the path wasn't there anymore. Instead, the thorn-filled Hedge had closed in around the cottage, making it impossible to get there.

Less cursed his luck. He tried using his fae powers to exert his control over the Hedge to re-open the path. It shivered and he wrested a gap in the thorns barely large enough to get through, but when he was half-way, the Hedge exploded in a writhing surge. Less found himself firmly caught, impaled upon the thorns and lifted off off the ground, unable to move. For a moment, he thought he heard an old man cackling and then, in the distance he heard a terrifying howling.

Less gritted his teeth against the pain. Mira was still somewhere out there. He tried to free his arm holding his umbrella without moving the rest of his body too much. Every time he shifted, the thorns dug deeper. "Rey, Mira!" he shouted. "I'm stuck in the thorns!" He tried to pop open his umbrella and summon the wind to lift him off the thorns and into the air where he could get some perspective.

The thorny vines wrapped themselves tight around Less, actively working to prevent his

escape. He looked to the hand he held his umbrella in and realized if he opened it, there was a very good chance the thorns would damage it, possibly even beyond repair.

Rey called back "Less, if I come to help, I will lose sight of the exit!"

"Stay where you are, then," Less called back. "The Hedge is acting strangely here, actively working against me. So close to the City it shouldn't be the case but the expanding Breach must be affecting it." Less tried to relax his body so as not to tear against the thorns. If the wolves wanted him, the Hedge would have to release him first, and then at least he could act.

"Someone else could be controlling it," Rey pointed out.

"Let me know if you see anyone, or any briarwolves."

Another howl echoed through the forest, and it seemed closer this time. Suddenly, the vines tear away from Less, dropping him hard to the ground and pull back as if they had never blocked the way. The next moment, Mira stepped into his line of sight on the path from the cottage.

"Oh there you are!" Mira said with a smile. She came over and helped him up. Observing the pokes and tears, she asked, *"You look as though you were running straight into the thorns, but of course you would never do such a thing. What's happened?"*

Less accepted her help gratefully and rubbed at some painful scratches. "Someone, or maybe whatever is expanding the Breach, is controlling the Hedge here. The path slammed shut on me. Rey is still keeping an eye on the Breach. Did you get anything from the cottage?"

"I really did. There is a lovely young woman there, who I'm sure is not what she seems. She says that she knows of the breach but can't stop it worsening. She does know how it may be done, but she'll only tell me in exchange for something called the Braken Pearl." Mira went on to describe her meeting with the woman, leaving off any personal feelings or observations so that Less could draw his own conclusions.

"She must be a powerful fae creature to build her Hollow so conspicuously and to convince the briarwolves leave her alone. I wonder what a Braken Pearl is that she values it so highly? That might be worth finding out before we venture further. This place is getting dangerous."

"I think she might be very powerful, yes," Mira agreed. *"Let's talk with Rey about the Pearl. Maybe she knows something of it. When she was the Witch, she had access to a lot of lore."*

"Fair enough. She should be just up the path," he said. "Rey! Mira found me and we're coming back!"

Rey was where they'd left her, but she had a slightly dazed expression on her face, and had a tiny trail of blood trickling down from her temple.

Mira hurried over to her. *"Rey! What happened? Are you okay?"*

Rey blinked, and her eyes refocused on her friend. "What? No, I'm fine. A spryte was being chased by something and the stupid thing ricocheted off my head.

It sounded suspicious to Mira. *"What kind of thing?"*

"The animal chasing the spryte?" Rey gave Mira a look. "It looked like a cross between a rabbit and a hawk. And it was the spryte that hit me, not that hawk-rabbit-thing." It wasn't anything that Less had heard about before.

Less examined the ground in case the spryte had dropped anything during the collision. Some were known to carry tiny weapons coated in poisons. "We'll keep an eye on you. Have you ever heard of anything called a Braken Pearl?"

"I think so," Rey replied. "Why?"

"Only that the woman in the cottage wants one in exchange for information about the Breach," replied Less as he hunted amongst the grass. "What does it do?"

It doesn't really do anything," Rey replied. "Not on its own at least. It's relatively versatile, and can be used as the foundation of certain tokens, and is on the ingredient list of a number of spells and potions."

"That makes sense. Who knows what weird pie it would bake into." Less, having not found anything incriminating around Rey's feet, stood and peered closely at her head wound. It was nothing more than a long but shallow scratch, the kind that bled profusely but posed no real danger. "Are you feeling any better? If you're hurt it might be wiser to abandon this expedition for now."

"I already told you I feel fine," Rey said with smile. "No headache, nothing."

Less wasn't entirely convinced. Her unseeing daze she was in when they had come upon her had raised the hairs on the back of his neck. He looked to Mira for her opinion.

Mira was concerned but didn't know what to make of it either. She decided to take Rey's word for it as they had nothing else to go on. "Okay." She went on to tell Rey what she learned from the pie-baker as far as where to find the Braken Pearl.

"So," Mira concluded, *"it seems a risky proposition, but perhaps less risky than letting the Breach continue to grow."*

"Definitely," Rey agreed. "Where she said we'd find the bracken pearl matches what I know of them. Problem is, it means going out of sight of the Breach."

"Normally, following the path out of sight of the Breach isn't necessarily a problem," said Less. He had extensive knowledge of the Trods and other pathways in the Hedge around Mythic. "It would not be that hard to find a Gateway back to the mortal world this close to Mythic. The problem is that something seems to be actively controlling the Hedge here and as we venture deeper in search of the Bracken Pearl the difficulties we will face will only grow. But, we didn't enter the Breach just to stare at it from the other side. We should follow the path into the forest and see if we can't find the ravine the woman in the cottage spoke of."

"*You are absolutely right, Less,*" Mira said. "*We're letting fear get the better of us and that is just what the dark side wants.*" She'd never mixed Star Wars ideology with one of their missions so it was high time it was done.

"The dark side?" Rey said with a little smile and a chuckle.

The trio set off deeper into the forest. It was deathly quiet around them, with only their movements providing any sound other than the occasional howl breaking the silence. Sometimes the howls sounded close by, others very distant, but they never caught sight of whoever - or whatever - was making the noise.

Mira led the way along the path so Less could pay close attention to the ebb and flow of the dreamland they stalked through. They left quite a path behind them. The brush crisped up at Mira's approach, her fire and Autumn natures combining for a withering effect. This all froze over with frost as Winter followed up on Mira's iciness. All to thaw again once Rey passed, her Flowering nature leaving some re-growth once they passed. Less kept a careful account of the landmarks of Mythic as they moved through the faerie forest. They had crossed one of the spur lines of the railway - it was a Trod in its own right. The glinting, silvery rails struck an eerily straight path through the murk but they ignored it. Their path lay in a different direction. Less could still see the rooftops of the Belle Park apartments and the train station clocktower through the trees behind them. There seemed to be a break in the trees to the right, perhaps a lake, but he kept bearing left when the path would let him. The trees were denser and the land began sloping steeply down.

The path took a sudden, sharp left turn and the ground started sloping up again, taking the completely out of sight of the Breach and their world beyond. The oppressive atmosphere of fear and hate got stronger the further along the path they went. The trees grew denser and larger, leaning over the path to block out almost all of the sunlight.

"So much for a ravine," whispered Less and he climbed the hill behind Mira. "But it does feel like we're getting closer to something." He turned to check on Rey before continuing. She appeared to be fine, and was keeping an alert eye on their surroundings, and occasionally checking the path behind them.

Mira was carefully watching the forest ahead of them, worried something might be stalking them unseen. *"I agree with that. Plus, a ravine could open up practically at our feet before we notice it in this foliage."*

"There's nothing for it but to continue on a ways," replied Less. "We can reassess in 10 or 15 minutes. I'd suggest enacting some protective Contracts if I didn't know it would light us up as Glamour-beacon worse than we already are."

The path kept going upward, getting ever steeper, then started making very sharp turns, making it impossible to see what was further along. After the fifth such turn, Mira noted a sudden, steep drop-off and deftly stepped to the side, finding secure footing before she might have tumbled into a bramble with thorns as long as her hand and razor-ferns with leaves that could slice flesh into ribbons.

"Hold up," she warned her friends. *"There's a drop-off here."*

"This must be the ravine the woman was talking about," said Less as he peered over Mira's shoulder. "Does the path continue? Can you see any way down?"

Mira nodded. *"Yes, I think there is one. But it's very narrow and could be dangerous. We need to be careful and go slow."*

Less used his sword to cut free a long vine he could use as a rope. He secured one end to a sturdy tree and handed the rest to Mira. "Give two tugs when you get down and I'll follow."

"Those thorns look nasty," Rey said as she joined them at the top of the ravine.

"Yes, be careful, Mira," said Less. "It would be prudent to wear some armour."

Mira smiled up at him as she took the vine and began carefully making her way down.. She didn't really want to spend the glamour on it just yet. Instead, she thought she could simply be careful.

Once Less felt Mira's double-tug on the vine, he nodded to Rey and started picking his way carefully down into the ravine. About halfway down, his hands slipped on the vine but he regained his grip before he slid more than a foot or two.

Rey followed Less down easily, but when her foot touched the ground, there was another howl - and it sounded close.

"Well, that's not good. Let's get to searching around down here and get out. Rey, where should we look first?" Mira asked.

"If I remember correctly," Rey said after thinking for a moment. "The pearls can be found in

the thickest, most dangerous spots in places like this."

Less drew his sword and hacked idly at an errant thorn branch. "Do they look like regular pearls?"

"Some might," Rey replied. "I know what they can be used for, and that they don't all look the same. I'm pretty sure I can recognize it when I see one."

"Okay. Someone keep watch so I don't get my ass bitten off or something." Mira got down on her hands and knees and started very carefully looking through the densest foliage.

Less confirmed that Rey's keen senses were on watch. "Two pairs of eyes are better than one." He began searching as well, using his sword to cut away branches so he could delve further into the brambles.

After searching for almost two hours, even Mira had to admit they were probably in the wrong spot; not deep enough into the forest to find any bracken pearls.

Less emerged from the latest tunnel he had hacked into the bushes. He was scratched and dirty. Wiping sweat from his forehead with his handkerchief he said, "This isn't helping us find out why the Breach is expanding. Maybe this bracken pearl business is just a trick to get us lost. It's going to get dark eventually and I'd rather not be in the deepest part of the forest when it does."

"You could be right. But the lady I met said she could tell us how to stop it. I think it's worth it. Maybe we just need to go deeper into this forest." Mira hesitated, then looked embarrassed because she'd forgotten this part. *"She did say it would be in the heart of the forest and I don't think we are there yet..."*

Less looked around, the memory of the nearby howl troubling him. "I don't like it. You said yourself we should look around and get out."

"I don't like it either, but if we stop now, we still have no way to stop the spread of the breach," Mira pointed out. *"Think we have no other better choice."*

Less let out a long sigh but relented. "Very well. At least there is an animal track through the brambles." As they walked Less removed his jacket, hopelessly torn from searching in the thorns, and tied strips of it onto branches. If he spotted a Lanternclove he could use the sap to make some torches in case Mira was too busy to provide light once it got dark.

Mira tried to pick a careful way through the thorns and lead them all deeper into the forest.

The going was difficult, and all three members of the motley were soon sore and bleeding from shallow scrapes from the thorns. At the bottom of the ravine, darkness fell quickly, and soon it was pitch black. Howling started up again, sometimes close, sometimes far

away, but it was impossible to be certain due to the echoing nature of the ravine.

"Mira, if you can provide some good light, Rey and I can search for this pearl," said Less as he picked his way along with the help of his pocket light. He set his torches down to lighten his burden.

Mira seemed a little relieved. Seeing a torch would be a lot more efficient than using magic, she picked one up and lit it, then held it away from combustibles but high enough that Rey and Less could use it to see by.

Less set about trying to find a pearl amongst the brambles. The flickering light of the torch made the shadows dancing around as if deliberately taunting him. Ahead of him, just out of sight, something rustled in the darkness, and howls broke out on the ridge above them - and it sounded like the motley was surrounded.

"Stupid pearl," Less muttered to himself. He stood and crept back to Mira while trying to watch for movement on the ridge. "Remember what Rey said - they are trying to get us to run in fear."

Mira nodded and backed close to her mates so that her back was nearly touching their backs. *"I think we are going to have to fight our way out of this one. I recommend hitting them with everything we have once one shows himself in order to try to teach them never to bother us again."*

Less lifted the barrel of his netgun and pointed it outward into the thorny darkness. It might slow one of them down before he switched to his sword. "Right," he said grimly. "Though I suppose that's what they are thinking too," he added wryly.

"Are we no longer looking for the pearl," Rey said, her eyes scanning the ridge above them in the dark. "Or did you want me to search while the two of you keep watch?"

Less lowered the barrel of the bulky netgun. "Well, if you feel an attack by the wolves is not imminent, it would probably be better if I searched for the pearl. Both of you make far better guards than I."

Mira was a little off stride. When she heard the howls on the ridge, she thought an attack had been imminent, too. *"I wish we were closer to a stream. I might be able to summon more guards and then the two of you could both search for the pearl."*

"They don't attack," Rey replied, "so much as chase you down. They like to get their prey terrified and on the run, herding them onward with their howls and darting false attacks. Then, when they've had their fun, they go in for the kill and eat."

Mira frowned. *"You're sure they won't 'dart' in and attack our asses while we have our noses in the dirt looking around for this pearl?"*

"Not unless they get bored," Rey answered. "Or decide it's going to take more than just howling to get us to run."

"I'm not sure that's very reassuring," Mira said. "Okay, I'll keep watch. You two find that pearl."

Less took a moment to find his elemental nature and still the storm brewing inside him. He leaned the netgun up against a tree to free himself up for another venture into the brambles. He drew his sword to use for cutting and probing. In his other hand he shone his pocket light into the dark crevices of the underbrush.

Rey watched Less for a moment, then shook her head. Less and Mira sensed the expenditure of Glamour, and the thorn covered bushes and vines lifted up and out of the way, clearing the path and making it far easier to search for anything which might be hiding in it. Less thanked her and continued looking.

It was difficult to tell how much time was passing in the slowly growing dark of the ravine, but with the shadows came the creatures that thrive in the darkness. Several times as Less and Rey searched the bracken, Mira saw flashes of something just outside of the light cast by the burning torch, and heard the skittering and chittering of things in the dark. Mira couldn't help but feel the motley was surrounded.

Less was starting to wonder again if they were on a wild goose chase when, just beyond the light of Mira's torch, he saw an opalescent globe around the size of a grapefruit. It was half buried beneath a tangle of vines with thorns longer and thicker than his fingers.

"Finally!" he whispered to himself as he willed his Winter aspect to wither the vines until they were dry and crumbling. He grabbed the pearl and yanked it free. He scuttled back on his hands and knees and stood up, calling to his friends, "Got it!"

"I found one as well," Rey replied, holding a bracken pearl in her right hand.

"That's an unexpected boon. Let's keep one in reserve, hidden somewhere." Mira was looking around warily. "Not to throw a wet blanket on our success, but I think we are surrounded. We should go back the way we came and stick together. I get a feeling that what's out there would love it if one of us got separated."

Anything else someone might have said was cut off by a bellow of rage loud enough to make the ground shake.

Mira froze. When the echoes of the sound diminished, she said shakily, *"Geez, you'd think we just plucked someone's balls..."*

Mira's comment forced Less to look at the pearl with renewed suspicion. The glistening opalescent took on a grisly aspect in his mind. With a slight shudder, he crammed it into the waist pocket of his coat, took up his netgun and relieved Mira of the torch.

Another roar shattered the night, and now the ground shook with the heavy stomps of something coming their way very quickly.

Less' mouths went dry. They'd alerted some kind of giant but fleeing the scene would probably just send them careening into a briarwolf ambush. He readied his Contracts in his mind, preparing to throw up his elemental armour as soon as their pursuer came into sight. "Let's get into those big trees. They'll offer us slightly more protection than this bramble patch!"

Rey finished stuffing her pearl into the inside pocket of her jacket and scanned the terrain in the direction Less had indicated. "It's going to be a real bitch climbing the side of the ravine to get to them." She looked back in the direction of bellows, and her face paled. "Oh, crap."

As the ground-shaking stomps got closer, the motley could see what was after them - and it wasn't hard to miss. Taller than a three story building, the creature was a three eyed humanoid covered with an armor of thick scales and a turtle-like shell studded with barbed spikes the length of a grown man's arm.

"I think a strategic withdrawal is in order here," Mira said fearfully.

"Let's stay low and head to the right, towards the side of the ravine we came down," said Less, resisting the urge to turn invisible. "Maybe the giant will lose sight of us in the brambles."

Mira's vote was definitely flight, if possible, over flight here. In fact, she was feeling much more in tune with her feelings lately, ever since the Ice Princess... well. Right now she was just feeling fear and rather vulnerable considering she didn't have any magical, failsafe that bailed her out of tight spots when she lost consciousness. From now on, she'd likely just die horribly and alone. Yeah, running seemed like a great idea. She went the way Less suggested.

The route the Winter King had chosen was very steep, even steeper than the one they'd used to enter the ravine. It was a struggle to climb it, and in no time they were stabbed and torn by the vicious brambles. It was slow going, a difficult climb for the motley. Mira was just inches from the top when the plant she was using to climb the incredibly steep path pulled out by the roots. She fell too suddenly and too quickly for Less to catch her, but Rey was able to catch and stop her, almost dislocating her shoulder in the process.

With Less and Mira's help, Rey managed to finish the climb - just as the giant creature was upon them. The creature's huge fist slammed down, crushing and tearing away a huge section of the ravine wall. Something about the attack made Less think he was the target.

"That was close!" gasped Less as he regained his stability. The giant's fist had narrowly

missed him and the ground beneath his feet had begun to crumble, forcing him to leap away. He gestured frantically with both arms for Rey and Mira to follow the path. "Go! Go! Hurry!" He waited for only a second, until the monster had swung back his arm for another strike before dashing after the two women. Hopefully it was enough for them to gain some distance on him.

Mira tried to move that much faster. *"Should I be getting ready for battle?"* she called as she ran. *"I think I can still do the ice armor thing. Or something similar. Maybe?"*

"We can't fight this thing," Rey yelled. "Not now." As if to emphasize her words, the creature's fist slammed down behind Less, missing him by a step. The creature roared in frustration, and the ground began to shake and heave as it tried to plow through the side of the ravine like it was the wall of a sand castle.

"Keep running! We need a place to hide," Less called up from behind. "Or an opening in which we can make a Gate back to the mortal world. Aim for the direction of the cottage." He hoped the cliff face would at least slow the giant down enough for them to lose the giant in the trees. Barring that, he hoped the woman in the cottage had baked enough pies for their unintentional guest.

Mira kept an eye out, but wasn't picky. She'd even settle for a fox hole big enough for them to fit. Or fox-ish hole. Ahead and to the left, in what she thought was the direction of the cabin, was an opening into what looked like a tunnel. "Here!" she yelled. "In here!" Then she dove through the opening, hoping it wasn't a shallow cave, because she'd feel pretty stupid with a bump on her noggin and her ass hanging out of the hole.

The ground beneath the motley's feet surged and shook as the creature's powerful legs plowed their way through the earth in its pursuit of its prey.

Rey followed close on Mira's heels, waiting just a moment to ensure that she wouldn't land on Mira, and in the blink of an eye, she was no longer visible.

The creature roared, and its fist came down again, creating a crater where it hit the ground, and leaving Less unbalanced teetering on the crater's rim. Rushing headlong into the lair of some creature of the Hedge was the last thing Less wanted to do. An ear-splitting roar from the giant reminded him that actually it was the second-to-last thing he wanted to do. Top of that list was being crushed by a giant. With the wind in his heels, he followed Rey into the earthy darkness.

The earth around the motley shifted violently, throwing them around in the tunnel. There was a roar, followed by a thundering crash, and then everything went black.

The beam of Less' pocket light blazed through the dust sifting down from the tunnel roof. He sought out his motley-mates with the beam before politely directing to the floor. "Is anyone hurt? We should try to put some distance between us and that thing. It could cave in this tunnel simply by walking around." The dirt in the air caused him to cough.

"I'm okay," Rey replied. "Mira?"

Mira sat up and brushed off her hands. *"I'm good. Yea, lets get moving before this escape tunnel turns into a tomb."*

"There's only one way to go," Rey said. "Less, do you want to squeeze past us and lead the way, or do you want to pass your flashlight up to Mira?"

Less passed his light up the line. It probably wasn't wise to light a torch in such an enclosed space.

"Thanks," Mira said, then shined the light down the tunnel to see what they were walking into. The tunnel extended far beyond the limits of the tiny flashlight, and the motley could see they would shortly have to be crawling on their hands and knees in pretty short order.

Less followed behind Rey, blinking grit from his eyes. "Any bets on what dug this tunnel?" he asked.

"Something with claws about half again as wide as my hand," Rey answered without pausing.

Less paused to look down at his grimy hand. His eyes rolled around the tunnel as he extrapolated the beast in his mind. "Do you think it's a briarwolf den?"

Rey shook her head. "No. They do more dug outs than tunnels. And their claws aren't that big."

"Whatever dug this place out might still be here," Mira remarked as she continued forward, now on her hands and knees.

"And it is likely that whatever it is will not be happy to find us in its home," said Less. There wasn't much they could do about it beyond doing their best to be unobtrusive and quickly find an exit.

The motley continued to crawl forward in silence for what seemed like hours, and they started to pick up the odor of rotting meat.

"Ugh," whispered Less. "I was beginning to hope this tunnel belonged to a very large mole."

"Pew," Mira agreed. *"For the record, that was not me."*

Rey was, for the first time, thankful for all the "presents" Hamilton gave her - sometimes they were very ripe by the time she got them. Breathing shallowly through her mouth, she continued to move forward down the tunnel with the others.

The stench got worse and worse until the small beam of the tiny flashlight fell upon a huge corpse, blocking the tunnel, and apparently well into the rotting process. The thing was covered with maggots, beetles, and other insects none of the motley could identify.

"*Oh gag!*" Mira complained. "*This is totally gross! I'm not touching it.*" The nymph came to a dead stop so suddenly, Rey bumped into her.

"I don't think we have much choice," Rey replied. "We have to get past it to get to the other end of the tunnel." If there is one, she thought, but kept that to herself.

"*Can't we turn around? Maybe we can tunnel out the way we came in. The giant might be long gone by now.*" The nymph didn't look motivated to crawl forward even an inch.

"This is horrible!" choked Less. "What could have killed it?" It was difficult to see past both Rey and Mira. "If we can't push it ahead of us we'll have to dismember it to get by." The mere thought of it nearly convinced him to try to dig his own tunnel.

Rey looked part Mira and said "There's room to get past it, if we stick really close to the wall." She gave Mira's butt a little shove. "Come on. The sooner we're past it, the sooner we get away from the smell. And when we're past it, you can use your contracts of water to get us clean again."

"*If there is any clean water to call. Not like I'm made of water,*" she grumbled. But Mira continued forward, albeit slowly and making every attempt to avoid touching any of the rotting flesh and bugs. Unfortunately, her attempts were futile. The floor of the tunnel was covered with rotted flesh and the liquids given off by putrefaction.

She jerked away from the crawling feeling, screamed and promptly vomited.

Rey felt her stomach heave, and she barely managed to prevent herself from following Mira's example. Less, on the other hand, wondered what the fuss was all about - he'd dealt with worse.

Less paused to examine the front side of the dead creature, wondering what it was and why it had suddenly died in its tunnel. This gave Mira a bit of time to compose herself before he asked, "Can you see anything up ahead?"

Mira had struggled ahead to get past as soon as she could. Choking with the suffocating smell, closed confines and feeling of disappearing oxygen she was freaking out and barely holding it together. She wished she could retreat into her mind and let someone else drive for a while. Those days were gone, and probably for the best, she supposed.

"*I-- I don't know. It's all black. Just more dirt and tunnel,*" Mira said.

"Let's keep moving," Rey said.

"Yeah, let's put some distance between us and this thing." Even from his awkward location Less could tell that Mira was not handling the tunnel very well. He had spent long hours in all manner of cramped and awful places in his duties smuggling changelings and supplies in and out of the Hedge and mortal countries. It was best for her to have to focus on leading them that dwelling on her predicament.

Mira pushed onward and kept crawling, trying not to think about what lay behind them and if there might be more like that in store for them.

Eventually, they left the rotting corpse behind them, though not its effects. The motley's clothes were full of it, being the stench along with them. Temperature seemed to be going up, and the air a bit dryer.

They continued to move, and Mira thought the tunnel may be angling upward a bit, but as she was about to share this information, the motley heard a loud snuffling noise, like something sniffing their air when it caught an interesting scent.

It was probably too late, but Less decided to activate his elemental contract to control the air in the tunnel. He gently shifted the ventilation to act towards the motley to draw their scent away from whatever was up ahead. He remained stock still in anticipation.

Mira shined her borrowed light down the tunnel in hopes of seeing what was likely going to eat her face. Whatever it was, it was out of sight, past the first curve in the tunnel they'd encountered. So, Mira kept crawling forward, eyes peeled for that first glimpse of whatever it was.

"Mira!" Less whispered, briefly allowing his breeze to carry his voice forward to her. "Where are you going? It could be trying to decide whether to take this tunnel or not."

"*I have got to get out of this tunnel!*" she whispered back. She actually doubled her pace as the sensation of being unable to breathe made her chest constrict. That was nearly her undoing as she suddenly discovered nothing but open space under her hands. She fell, but immediately spread eagle to catch the sides of the hole. Her thighs caught the dirt walls, which slowed her, and then she caught herself with her hands.

And that meant she dropped the flashlight. "*Stop! Hole!*" she cried as she stared after the bouncing, falling flashlight.

Less had urged Rey to catch Mira before she got away from them but now they stopped suddenly in the dark. "Mira? Can you climb out? Rey, do you have your phone for a bit of light?" He reached out through his connection with the elemental air to draw fresh air back down into the tunnel. He funnelled it into Mira's face in an effort to help calm her. The air was hot, dry, and carried with it a skunk-like stench.

Mira coughed and choked. *"I think something just peed itself down there."*

"My phone was almost dead before we went looking for the bracken pearls," Rey said as she reached blindly for Mira's hand to help pull her up. She found a foot, and helped Mira out with a firm pull.

When she was free of the hole, Mira said, *"Before I dropped the flashlight -- sorry Less -- I noticed this hole pretty much fills the bottom of the tunnel. It will be very tricky to bypass."*

"How far would you say?" Less asked Mira. "Could we jump it? Rey, could you make yourself longer and grab with your claws?" He outstretched his arms and pressed against the sides of the tunnel. "Or we could do that chimney-climb thing on the sides of the tunnel until we get across." He wished his net-gun fired a grappling line instead of just a net.

"I could, maybe," Rey replied. "But it won't really help either of you. I can't turn into a ladder or bridge, and I'm not strong enough to carry or support either of you."

"I think having someone on the other side would be a big help," said Less. "You would be there to help us climb out of the hole on the other side."

"I don't know," Rey said as she looked down into the hole. They couldn't see glow of the flashlight down in that darkness. "It could be very deep. Too deep to climb out of."

"And I think something is down there," Mira added quietly.

"No. I'm not talking about climbing down this side of the hole and up the other side," said Less. "Nothing could convince me that going even deeper into this tunnel system would be a good idea. I mean that when we jump or climb across, Rey will be on the other side to help."

"Climb across then," Rey said. "There's no way we could jump when we're forced to be crawling."

"Okay." Mira did her best to straddle the edge of the hole as she made her way past. She carefully inched her way over the hole in the bottom of the tunnel. It was difficult, and at one point she was sure she heard something scabbling up the walls to get her, but she was soon on the relative safety of the other side.

Rey followed next, taking just a bit longer than she did, and Less made the journey as fast as Mira had. As Less dusted himself off as best he could, Mira thought she saw something moving in the dark further down the tunnel. When she turned to look, she saw a dozen pairs of small glowing red eyes.

"Um. Hello," she said hoping they were amicable creatures.

Less quietly unshouldered the net gun and other encumbrances. If the creatures attacked he would need as much mobility as he could get in the tight tunnel. As he considered the logistics of the shot, he realized there was likely no way for him to use the net gun without hitting Mira and Rey, even if they flattened themselves against the tunnel walls.

The motley could see movement further down the tunnel, and the number of glowing red eyes doubled.

"I don't suppose anyone has another light?"

The eyes stared, unblinking and unmoving, at the motley.

Less rummaged in his pockets. He had his cell phone but he also had matches and candles that he kept on hand to open a door to his Hollow. "Why are they just waiting there?" If these were helpful creatures he didn't want to strike a match if they were afraid of light or fire.

"Maybe they're trying to decide who to eat first," Rey said in a soft voice.

Less found his cell phone first and thumbed it on, illuminating the tunnel with the dim blue light.

"I can't believe you just said that out loud," Mira scolded Rey at the same time as she was cringing. *"I hate this tunnel!"* She blinked at looked at the red eyes again. Since Less had pulled out the phone to provide the light she'd asked for, she could swear they were getting closer.

Rey had the absurd urge to chuckle, but it faded when more eyes appeared, and a skittering and snicking sound began to fill the tunnel. Then the eyes began to move and indeed, began to get closer.

Less flicked his phone up the tunnel to Mira. "Press forward with the light. If they live down here in pitch black they might shy away from the phone. I'll get a candle lit."

"Okay. I'm pretty good with fire, too, so if you get one lit let me know. I could use flames to burn these little suckers to a crisp."

"And kill us at the same time," Rey said.

As Mira moved forward, the skittering noise grew louder, and it rapidly became clear that whatever those eyes belonged to was not only coming toward them but approaching the speed of a charge. The first of them came into sight Rey couldn't help but gasp. It was ant the size of a shoebox, its eyes glowing a baleful red, and its huge mandibles dripped a slime that smoked and sizzled when it fell on the tunnel floor.

Mira didn't have time to argue about her level of control over flame. Instead she

immediately activated her ice armor and prepared to defend the others. Less activated his own elemental armour and proceeded to attempt to light the candle. Even if Mira didn't immediately flood the tunnel with fire, it would be useful to have the flame if the encounter went badly.

A dozen more ants appeared behind the first, and then a dozen more. They kept on coming until the tunnel was choked with them. The one in the lead suddenly came to a stop in front of Mira, just out of a lunging arm's reach. It stood there, staring at Mira.

As Less fumbled in the darkness trying to light the candle, he felt dirt and other debris fall from the ceiling of the tunnel onto him.

Mira looked at the creature and tried to speak to it. *"My friends and I only want to leave after being chased in here by a giant. Will you allow us to pass?"*

It just stood there, and continued to stare at her.

"Does anyone have any sugar, or something for it to eat?" *Besides us*, Less thought afterward. "Maybe they just want to get by to get at that dead thing."

"I don't know," Rey said. "They didn't start heading this way until they saw the light."

As far as Less was concerned there was one way to go in a tunnel. "Like moths? Attracted to the light?" He paused in his attempt to get a candle lit, but it was Mira that had his phone and their only current light source.

The ant remained where it was, its unblinking eyes on the motley.

"I'm having a staring contest with a creature that has no eyelids. What should I do?"

"Try giving it room to pass," suggested Less. "It only has one possibility of a direction so maybe it's confused by having that option blocked."

Mira squeezed herself against one side of the tunnel to see if it would see the opening and pass them by. She did not want that thing touching her; she gave it as much room as she could, but the ants didn't move.

She moved forward a bit to see if the ants would move. The ants did nothing. It was almost as if they were waiting for something. *"Okay. I'm moving forward. But if I touch them right now I'll likely kill them with cold. Which reminds me -- don't you two touch me either."*

"You could try turning off the light," offered Less. "Maybe they're mesmerized by it."

Mira switched off the cell phone, enveloping them all in darkness. She paused a moment, waiting to see if they rushed her.

The motley heard some chittering in the dark, but none of the glowing red eyes moved.

"I'm out of ideas," said Less. "Do you want me to light this candle?"

"That might help us see better. I'm moving forward now. I can't take being in here much longer. If they don't move, then I'm going through them." Mira crawled forward and this time she wasn't stopping. If they got in their way, she'd touch them and use her deadly cold to eliminate them if they refused to move.

She came to a stop, however, when something occurred to her. The ants weren't acting like normal ants. They weren't threatening the motley, and the ants certainly didn't feel threatened. Not yet at least. But what were they waiting for?

Less realized the ants had shown signs of intelligence, but were obviously unable to communicate verbally. They'd noticed a disturbance in the tunnel and came to investigate. They were curious about the motley. He got the sense they were deliberately blocking the tunnel so the motley couldn't pass, and were waiting for them to do something. It was almost as if the ants were acting like a living roadblock, looking for some kind of payment to let the motley pass.

Mira and Less both felt some earth fall from the roof of the tunnel and dust their hands and the backs of their necks.

"Wait Mira, just a few minutes longer," said Less. "These ants are not threatening us yet. They want some -- *What the Hell is going on up there?*" The dirt falling on him was becoming annoying. He lit the candle and investigated the roof of the tunnel. There were little cracks in the earth, like it was drying out, and the small roots from plants growing above were shriveled.

They were closer to the surface than he thought. "The tunnel looks pretty dry. Maybe they want some water," he suggested.

Mira stopped just at the verge of doing something she couldn't take back. *"Water? I don't have any. And now I'm thirsty, dirty and haven't been in a nice pool or bath for... I don't even know how long. Thanks for mentioning it."* She paused. *"You know, I think something is stomping around up above us. What if it's the giant? Maybe if we get out of here, we'll only just get stomped on."* She looked around some more and noticed the spot where acidic spit of the lead ant was dripping was getting all dried out and cracked.

Her eyes widened. *"Oh shit! Oh shit oh shit!"* She crawled backwards as fast as she could, right into Rey's face and caused a traffic jam right back up to the hole they passed. *"Jump down the hole! These things dehydrate what they touch. And more are probably coming from above!"* Panicked, she was pushing backwards as hard as she could.

"Mira, wait--" Rey said before she cried out in pain as the nymph's icy armor began to

freeze the Autumn Queen's upper body and arms. She was trapped between Mira and Less, and there was nowhere for her to go to escape the frigid attack.

Mira immediately dropped her frost armor, realizing she hurt a friend. "*I'm sorry, Rey,*" she said.

Less let Rey deal with calming Mira down. "The only other thing that I can think of that the ants might want is the second Bracken Pearl we found."

"Yours, then?" Rey asked. Every move she made caused her to cringe, and with the frostburn on her hands, she couldn't hold anything, let alone reach into her inner coat pocket.

Mira tried to crawl over Rey.

"Dammit, Mira," Rey swore as pain lanced through her as she attempted to move. "Stay the hell where you are. Less can pass his up, roll it on the tunnel floor or something." There was just no room for the motley to try and maneuver past each other.

The pearl had been slightly too big to fit comfortably in his coat pocket and the delay in squeezing it out of the stretched seams hadn't helped Mira's state of mind. Finally, the corner stitching gave way and the pearl tumbled out. He rolled it past Rey to the front of the line.

At first, Mira just recoiled from the ants and the pearl. She curled up and hid her face. She couldn't take the enclosed space much longer and worse, she had begun to feel like this place was sucking the life from her body. It took a concerted effort for her to stretch out on finger, shove the pearl closer to the bugs and then pull her hand back again.

The lead ant came forward and with a quick snap of its mandibles cracked the pearl in half. A viscous liquid spilled out, and the shell collapsed to reveal an extremely small version of the thing that had attacked them in the ravine. The ant picked the tiny creature up and all of the ants turned and left, clearing the tunnel, and the drifting of dirt from the tunnel roof stopped.

"*It was a baby. We just gave them a baby!*" she hollered back at the people that were crawling like two feet behind her. "*A fetus-y baby. Ah barf!*" she gagged. No wonder the giant was pissed off.

Realizing the little red eyes were gone, Mira scrambled forward, blindly hoping to see daylight sometime very soon.

Rey followed quietly and gingerly, pausing only to scoop up much of the shell, which disappeared inside her coat.

Less tried not to think about what the ants and the woman in the cottage would do with

the giant's eggs, but in the complete darkness of the tunnel horrifying images kept floating before him. Just one more thing to push to the back of his brain to keep it out of reach of his conscience.

The tunnel seemed to continue on forever, but eventually, Mira could see light in the distance. As she moved toward it, the air in the tunnel got drier and hotter. As miserable as Mira felt in the dryness, she realized the Winter King could hardly be enjoying the heat. At least she had a partner in her misery, she told herself.

She struggled on, trying to quicken her pace, though in truth she knew she was probably barely maintaining the pace they'd started with. She'd been in the crushing depths of this tunnel, exposed to horrors and heat for what felt like hours. Her nerves were frayed, patience worn thin, and she was exhausted. Still, the light she could see gave her the hope to keep moving.

Less, as comfortable as he was in tunnels, felt enormous relief at the sight of the exit. That he could do nothing to relieve Mira's panicky anxiety had been awful. Her relief would be as much a release to him as the open air.

Mira scrambled out of the tunnel, barely noticing the shift from earth to parched sand, and she found herself standing in the middle of a vast desert. There was nothing but flat, featureless golden sand as far as the eye could see, under the burning hot sun.

She sank to her knees a few paces away from the tunnel's exit and whispered hoarsely, "*No water...*"

Less stood and stretched his legs. As he surveyed the empty land he shook the dirt out of his collar. With a frown, he inspected the deplorable state of his hat, but put it back on his head as welcome respite from the sun. In the Hedge, nothing could be considered an unexpected development, but in Mira's case it did add insult to injury. He scanned the horizon, looking for any sort of landmark or evidence of something growing. "No giants!" he said in mock happiness. "But we are really going to have to find a Gateway back to the mortal world. The chances of finding the cottage from here seems pretty small."

Rey took the lead in searching for an active gate, with Less and Mira helping out as they could. Periodically, as they searched, they found small amounts of drinkable water, but nowhere near enough to quench Mira's need. After twelve long hours under the murderous sun, they found it. A gate, triangle formed by a low, ruined wall and the long dead palm tree leaning against it, at a dried up and dead oasis. They could not see where they would end up if they went through it, as it was pitch black on the other side, but wherever it was, surely it had to be better than where they currently were.

Mira didn't wait around or make any comment at all. She called up a fragment of glamour to activate the triangle-shaped gate and half-limped, half-crawled through the gate. Less waited for Rey to pass through to the Mortal World before following. Normally, he gave the Hedge a farewell look (mostly to check if he was being followed) but after the long,

dehydrating search through an empty wasteland, he didn't care what came through after him.

It was quickly apparent to the motley they were in a building of some kind, the floor, walls and ceilings made of stone. The air was heavy, hot, and humid, and ahead of them they could see light coming through cracks in the covering at the end of the hallway. When they got closer to the exit, they realized it was blocked by heavy growth of tropical vines and tree roots.

Less squinted at the vines blocking the exit. It was suspiciously like the Hedge Breaches in Mythic - but they had to be well away from the affected areas here. Still, this investigation would have to wait. At best, they were all dehydrated. Mira seemed worse - staggering and a bit delirious (though, with her it was hard to tell sometimes) - and he worried she was suffering from heat stroke. The priority was to find water, a cool place to rest, and medical attention. The ritual he performed to open a Door to his personal Hollow required him to chalk a gateway on a surface and chant the opening phrase while surrounded by 4 burning candles at the cardinal points. He wasted no time marking a doorway on the stone wall but when he reached into his pockets for his matches and candles, he found only a sticky mess of wax. After resisting the use of his last few matches in the pitch darkness of the tunnel, the hours of searching in the blazing heat had ruined the tea-lights he carried. He swore loudly and squeezed the wax in his fists. "Do you have any candles on you, Rey? I can't open a door to my Hollow without them."

Rey shook her head and grimaced. "Afraid not." She walked up to the vines and examined them. "I think I know what plant this is," she said with a contemplative frown. The Autumn Queen reached out and clasped the vine just above the floor. Glamour shivered up the plant, bringing it to flower and then growing large, brown skinned fruit the size of grapefruit. A smile lit up her face as she pulled two of the fruit from the vine and offered them to Less and Mira. "Here. It's passion fruit."

Mira grabbed the offered fruit greedily, broke it open and began sucking the juices out with relish.

Less' duty-bound life didn't extend too far into botany. He gratefully accepted the fruit and followed Mira's example, but he was extremely puzzled. "Goblin fruit? Are we in another Breach - so far from the city?"

Mira, her throat moistened enough to try talking again, actually giggled. "*No, silly. Passion fruit is a tropical fruit. They also grow it in places like California and Florida. You can get it at the store.*"

"Native to South America too." Rey tore open her own fruit and slowly and carefully began to eat.

"And if we are back in our world, then sooner or later we'll find a door and then we can use to find our way back home. It's just a matter of time." After slurping down a little more,

she looked at her friends. "Speaking of time, I wonder how much has passed since we investigated the tear. You two will have certainly been missed by the courts of Mythic."

"Indeed." Less gave Rey a meaningful look. No one was clamouring for the Winter Crown but Autumn politics were definitely more...dynamic.

"What?" Rey asked Less, puzzled at his expression.

Less shook his head. "The state of our Courts is not important now. Mira's right, we need to establish when and where we are in order to find our way home." He looked through the vines covering the door. "Do you think we are in a South American jungle?"

"I don't think there's anywhere in the states where passion fruit grows wild like this," Rey replied. "Let's get out into the open and have a bit of a look around." She reached up and sliced some of the vines down with her razor-sharp claws, then stepped through the hold she'd made. Mira and Less heard her sigh and say "oh, crap."

"I take it that means we will not be calling a taxi any time soon?" Mira asked.

"Not unless you know one that will come to previously undiscovered Ancient Mayan cities in the jungle." Rey moved to the right and out of sight of the doorway.

Mira stepped outside, asking as she did so, *"How do you know it's Mayan?"*

Rey shrugged. "It's what I immediately think of when I see step pyramids in jungles."

A brief look around confirmed to Mira she was indeed standing on a step pyramid, but any other identifying features were hidden by jungle growth.

Mira considered the view, then remarked. *"Well, the only thing I know about the Maya is that they made a delicious sandwich spread and I'm still hungry."* She probably knew the origins of mayonnaise no better than she could spell it.

"Sandwich spread?" Rey shook her head and looked around. "Now that I think about it, it might not be Mayan. This place could have been built by the Moche of the Chavin, or the Aztecs or Toltecs. I'm pretty sure, though, that it's Moche or Chavin because of the passion fruit. It doesn't grow wild in Central America."

Despite being sore and exhausted from their trek through the Hedge desert, Less was enjoying exploring the ruins. The presence of the Gateway was telling as well. There were changelings here, once. "To think that this was once a city, and that desert wasteland beyond the Hedge was once full of their Trods, perhaps even a Goblin Market. Could the abandonment of this city have caused the desert? Or did the mortals leave once the Hedgelands dried up? It's fascinating."

"Who knows what secrets of theirs may be hidden here, or lost to time," Rey said with a

little smile.

"Or how many bloody sacrifices were made," Mira pointed out. "Did the Aztecs murder something like millions of people over time? They did it to appease their gods so they wouldn't be destroyed, if you believe TV. Might those gods easily have been the True Fae? Might they have been the ones to make contact here? There were never any changelings before the True Fae came and stole us away. Changelings die when the Fae get bored. Maybe so do civilizations."

The gloom her words had cast evaporated when she had a brighter thought. "Hey! Cities needed water and water means springs, rivers or wells! Maybe I can find a nice pool or pond!" She shaded her eyes and looked around for the telltale glint of precious water.

"More likely cenotes," Rey said, "where you might be able to get down into one, and if you survived that, you'd probably not be able to get out."

Mira smiled. *"Now that sounds like a challenge. Show me this key-note thing and let's make a bet."*

"No thanks," Rey replied as she looked around. "We need to figure out which way to go to get out of here and back to civilization."

"Actually, finding water should be high on our list of things to do," said Less.

"Undiscovered temples do not suggest a close proximity to civilization. We will have a long way to go and I for one need some rest before we start hiking again."

"I know we need water," Rey said. "I was saying no thanks to Mira's bet. I'll see what I can find in the way of food and maybe some water vines, and a way to take things with us."

While Mira looked for water, Less made for the highest point on the temple. From there he could use his umbrella to gain elevation to see if he could see which direction they should go. He rose to about 100 feet above the top of the pyramid, but all he could see was jungle stretching off in all directions toward the horizon. Though he was dismayed at the sight - he felt like Bilbo in Mirkwood - he couldn't help but enjoy the freedom of being in the sky again, buffeted by the wind.

He settled lightly next to Mira, who was peering down into what looked like a deep sinkhole quite a distance from the pyramid, likely beyond the boundaries of the ancient city. "No sign of anything for miles."

"Oh," she said a little startled at Less's arrival. She'd been trying to peer through the dark, gaping opening. *"I'm not at all sure there is water down there. But it's a hole. An opening. And therefore could be used as a door back into the Hedge. The problem is, it might not lead anywhere but to a pile of sand and we have only so much glamour before we run out and can't open doors anymore."*

"All too true. It seems like there are dead ends everywhere we turn." Less folded up his umbrella and knocked a pebble into the hole. "Whether we go back into the Hedge or head into this jungle we are going to need supplies to keep us going. Keep looking for that water. I'll see if I can find a good place to set up camp."

Loud squealing broke the relative silence, followed by the sounds of thrashing undergrowth somewhere far behind Less and Mira. Less immediately drew his sword. "Could that be Rey?"

"*I don't know.*" Needing to conserve her magic, Mira called on none of it. Instead, she crouched defensively and cautiously began making her way toward the sound.

The squeals grew louder, and the voice of an angry boar was added to the mix. There was a big thump, and the two changelings saw a tree about 100 feet away shake and sway from the contact.

"Whoa!" shouted Less. He was reluctant to run headlong into a dark jungle when he could put the sinkhole between him and whatever that was. "Rey! Are you in trouble?" he shouted.

There was a loud, savage snarl and the tree shuddered and cracked after another impact.

Less gritted his teeth and shook his head. "We have to assume Rey is in trouble! Let's go!" He rushed into the trees in the direction of the commotion. Mira followed.

All sounds of fighting abruptly ceased, and the vegetation stilled. As Less and Mira got closer, they thought they heard loud purring - not a noise either of them would associate with Rey. At least, not in this situation, thought Mira.

"*Someone is happy,*" Mira whispered. She pushed on to catch sight of what she hoped was a nice kitty cat with a captured songbird. To her disappointment and concern, she saw two large, obviously dead, peccaris and a very large jaguar standing over Rey. The Autumn Queen was pinned to the ground by one of the jaguar's huge paws, and it - no, he, Mira realized as she got a look at his equipment - was licking her.

Mira blinked but did nothing otherwise to get the jaguar's attention. "*Good thing she's a cat person,*" she whispered to Less. The jaguar lifted his head and looked straight at her and growled, deep and possessively. He pressed his paw down harder on Rey's chest, but she didn't react at all.

Less sheathed his sword slowly and calmly. Dealing with animals was something he always deferred to Rey. She didn't exactly seem in control of the situation but somehow he felt that she wasn't in too much danger. Without making eye contact with the jaguar, he signed to Rey, hoping she should see him. "*Need any help?*"

The jaguar snarled at Less and took his paw off Rey's chest. Keeping a watchful eye on the two changelings, the jaguar carefully closed its jaws around the collar and shoulder of her jacket. Never taking his eyes off or turning his back on Mira and Less, he began to drag her backwards into the jungle, issuing deep, threatening growls, warning them to stay back.

Rey didn't protest or move. In fact, her body was limp, and the quick glance they got at her face showed it slack and unresponsive, as if she were unconscious, and rivulets of blood had run down from in the hairline next to her right temple.

"That doesn't look consensual," said Less to Mira, drawing his sword once more.

Mira agreed. *"If that cat has kittens or cubs or whatever they call baby jaguars -- jaggies? -- he could be dragging her back to feed her to the... wait. This doesn't make any sense. Why is it not killing her first? Why is it leaving those big pig things? And also, do male jaguars even do any rearing of young?"*

The jungle plants between the changelings and the jaguar stirred and then burst with growth, creating an almost impenetrable wall extended about twenty feet to either side and at least that tall. The vines moved in a sinuous motion, like snakes about to strike, as if waiting for Less and Mira to make any move.

Through the narrow spaces between the plants, Less and Mira saw movement where the jaguar had been, a flash of darkly tanned skin, and the dark fabric of Rey's jacket now up at chest height before their view was completely blocked.

"A shapeshifter!" Mira exclaimed. Then she looked around at the moving jungle. *"And they are taking her but leaving us to rot. Hey!"* she shouted. *"Bring our friend back right now, or you won't like what I do to your jungle!"*

As soon as the word jungle came out of Mira's mouth, the heavens opened up in a deluge of rain. It came down hard and fast, leaving them almost instantly soaked to the skin. Mira gasped in surprise, then shouted in joy. Raising her face to the sky she raised her arms and let streaming rivulets of precious, fresh water wash down her body. She thought it would be perfect if the water was cold, but she'd take to warm water, just fine.

"Supernaturals certainly explain the temple!" shouted Less. He charged the vines with his sword, hoping to cut a hole he could slip through and chase whatever had kidnapped Rey.

And suddenly he was going in a different direction. Mira had grabbed his wrist and directed him to the left, around the writhing wall. *"Kill jungle later. Save Rey now!"* The water had re-energized the nymph and she led him off as fast as she could to get around the plant wall.

"Well, keep talking then, Mira," said Less over the downpour as he leapt over roots to keep up with her. "Old jaguar might listen to your siren call."

Mira realized the wisdom there. She began humming a simple, wordless tune she liked to sing when she was in her little Hedge spring.

When they finally got around the end of the plant wall, the jaguar - and Rey - were nowhere to be seen.

"Is this part of your plan?" inquired Less, breathless from running. He scanned the dark foliage, half expecting it to rise up and attack.

"*Plan? Sir, I think you have me confused with someone else,*" Mira retorted. She stopped humming and began looking around for signs of a body having been dragged and for feet to have trampled. The nymph was able to spot the path the jaguar had taken, but it ended abruptly, as if he and his prize had disappeared into thin air. She looked up into the trees.

About three quarters of the way up the tall trees, Mira thought she saw signs of claw marks on the trees, and what might just be extremely primitive walkways hidden amongst the vines and tree branches.

She blinked, then tapped Less's shoulder and pointed at what she was looking at.

"That's definitely where he's gone!" Less eyed the trees and walkways suspiciously. "We could probably follow them from down here."

"*But which way?*"

"Yes, good point. There's nothing for it but to climb up there and hope for some signs." Less approached the large tree trunk twisted round with vines. There seemed to be ample footholds. He tipped his hat back on his head and started up.

Mira cautiously followed him, looking around in case there were a lot more than just one jaguar-man around here.

It took a while, with a few slips, but eventually both Mira and Less managed to haul themselves up onto the primitive, rickety walkways. They were now panting, sweaty, and uncomfortably hot, and the heavy humid air felt like tar sticking to their skin.

Less fanned himself with his hat while he checked the walkways for some sign of Rey and her kidnapper. "No wonder they abandoned the city - this heat is oppressing!"

"*I hate being oppressed,*" Mira agreed. "*But at least everything is nice and wet!*" She, too, looked around. She felt wary and nervous, imagining jaguars and naked men about to pounce on them from every branch and crooked tree trunk.

The walkways are unsteady and sway slightly as the motley moves along them. There are signs of people walking back and forth, but impossible to tell which way the jaguar had

gone - until he saw a small piece of white spanish moss caught on one of the vines.

"Aha! This way!" Less picked up the pace as much as he dared on the narrow path. "Stay on guard. One person didn't erect this road by himself."

"*Don't worry. I won't let any of these freaks molest you,*" Mira assured him. Letting Less do the tracking, she put her eyes to watching for an ambush.

The two changelings continued along the suspended walkway until they came to a point where another path joined the one they were on. There were no clues as to which way to go next.

Less rapped his umbrella against the tree that bisected the path. "Damn it! Which way did they go?

What does he want with Rey anyway?" They could each take separate paths, of course, but that would leave them extremely vulnerable and no good to Rey. "Do you have a preference, Mira, or should we just gamble on the left one?"

"*Left is as good as any direction,*" Mira supposed.

Less immediately started walking, hoping for confirmation that they had guessed right. "We can only hope we run into *something* that will lead us to Rey."

They continued forward, taking a left at the next intersection of the walkways, and the scrap of black fabric, possibly torn from Rey's shirt, at the intersection after that confirmed they were on the right track. One more intersection, one more left turn, and their path seemed to be leading them to a small shack built around the side. It didn't look like much, but Mira could hear a sound she recognized.

She paused. "*Wait,*" she whispered. "*What was that?*" She listened a bit more at the sounds of foreplay. Her eyes widened. "*Someone is going to have sex. If that's Rey in there, and she's unconscious...*" She marched up the path and kicked the door of the small shack open. Less just remained where he was. He tipped his head into his hand and massaged his temples with his thumb and fingers.

The first thing she saw was Rey and a man in the middle of the floor. Rey was writhing under him, moaning softly, her body arching and begging for more under the sensual assault of his mouth and hands. He flipped Rey over onto her stomach and ran his hands over her ass, squeezing them before pulling her up onto her hands and knees. Her face turned toward Mira and the nymph saw that despite her friend's obvious participation and pleasure, her eyes were completely vacant.

Mira wondered what it would be like to be in Rey's place. She felt herself get wet and she started to ache for the man's touch. Rey's cry of relief and need as the man surged into her from behind made Mira's body tighten. Her body throbbed with each of his powerful thrusts into Rey from behind. Little needy sounds escaped from Rey as she fought his

control and tried to take more of him, to make him go faster, but his strong hands on her hips kept her in line.

He turned his head and Mira could see the hot, blatant "you're next" message in his eyes as he looked her over, not once stopping, or even slowing down, his taking of Rey.

Mira's outrage was drowned in unbidden lust, unnatural, and overwhelming. Never having been built for much in the way of self-denial, or really self-control, in the first place she found her resolve fled instantly. Her mind screamed in horror as her body shoved her thinking self out of the way and got to the business of the most basic functions of life.

She didn't remember dropping her pants and removing her panties. They were just gone; the heat of passion overrode not only her outrage but her sense of time. She would not wait. She pulled Rey away from him with a feral growl and then laid down in front of him, rear positioned and ready for him.

He didn't wait, thrusting into Mira without any preamble or preparation. He filled her almost to the point of pain, and the relief of it lasted for just a moment. It was no longer enough. She needed more.

Her last coherent thoughts were questions about how this could be happening, and then there just wasn't any thinking at all. She pushed back against him, uncaring of the situation, who saw, or even who it was that was doing this to her. Her body was going to mate and that was all. Her moans and primal grunts were obvious signs of the unbidden ardor.

Less was extremely surprised when he finally recognised some of the moans inside the shack as Rey's. *What were the odds? Not the odds that Rey was having sex, but that they had managed to come across her in the maze of trees.* He was suddenly brought back to himself when Mira's gasps and yelps took over when he was expecting an outraged beating to commence. He shook his head and looked up into the green leaves of the canopy overhead. *Was this really an appropriate time and place for this?*

He pushed himself off the trunk he was leaning against and went to the shack's open door. "Ladies, really! I thought you were more dog people..." His words didn't seem to penetrate whatever lusty haze fogged Mira's mind, and a random glance toward Rey proved she was in no condition to respond at all.

The man continued to ride Mira, making his thrusts even stronger and more possessive. He turned his head to look at Less and growled something, his eyes shifting from dark brown to yellow and his mouth filled with the sharp teeth of a predator.

Without time to think about the irony, Less' sword flew from its sheath like lightning. "That's rape! Get away from them!"

Three jaguars appeared out of the shadows and attacked, but Less' innate ability to sense

danger managed to avoid their charge.

With the savage howl of winter winds wrapping like armour around him, Less slashed at the jaguar-man assaulting Mira but one of the others blocked the path. The blade cut across the cat's forearm, raised to defend. Before Less could react, the shapeshifter lunged past the blade and sunk its teeth into Less' forearm. It tore savagely through the skin and muscle. Less was forced to drop his sword in order to disengage with the monster. His heart sank when he saw the slim blade tumble through the ill-fitting floorboards and drop into the jungle below. He cast about for some kind of weapon - a chair, a branch, *anything* - but the only thing within the closing circle of the three jaguar men was Rey's thong underwear. (Oh, if only it had been her bra - he could have *done something* with her bra!) Moving with the speed of the wind, he aimed a kick at one of the jaguars and tried to fog the sight of another with his fae powers. Neither was effective and they attacked, biting at his flailing limbs. Horrible, feline teeth cut through his elemental armour and left him bleeding and weak. He knew the fight was hopeless. The only way he could help his motley now was to get away and bide his time. He pointed meaningfully at the jaguar who all this time was still fucking Mira, the one who had also raped Rey, and vanished like steam above a cup of tea. Before the jaguars could collect themselves he was past them and through the window, drifting noiselessly down under his umbrella to the next tree.

The moment his foot touched the tree, he heard a roar from the jaguars. It was only the quick peek over his shoulder that prevented the fierce predators from landing on him before going to the ground. There they stopped, and rather than looking around, they tilted their heads up to the sky - and Less realized they were sniffing their air, trying to locate him.

He shifted the flow of air, hopefully to prevent his scent from getting to the beasts. One of the jaguars continued to sniff the air, while the other two started to search the ground, looking for signs of where their prey had gone. At that moment, he felt a trickle of something down his arm under his sleeve. Pulling the fabric aside, he saw he was bleeding - and if it wasn't stopped soon, it would soon drip onto the jungle floor, creating something the jaguars could follow. He wiped the worst of it on the tree trunk to keep it from dripping, and propped himself in the large V created by the mighty branches to assess his wounds. They were bad. Multiple puncture wounds from huge cats. He would need to clean the wounds soon to keep them from getting infected. For the time being, however, he packed the worst cuts with the moss that hung in bundles from the tree and tied it with his tie. He could use more bandages, but that was all he could do without ripping his clothes and risking a noise his pursuers would hear.

The jaguars continued to search for signs of Less, and when they look upwards they failed to spot him - much to Less' relief. After several agonizing minutes, the hunting cats spread in a circle in an attempt to find where he'd gone so they could resume their hunt.

Less decided to wait for another quarter of an hour to give the jaguars time to spread out enough to allow him to slip through the blockage. He had done that enough times, but

not usually drained of his vitality and fae magics. He painfully lowered himself down the tree, collected his sword, and moved quietly down-wind through the jungle. He desperately wished he could magically hide his trail, but he was utterly spent. He could only hope that the jaguars would be less vigilant once they gave up the chase and returned to their tree fort.

The man held Mira's hips in a bruising grasp as he continued to pound into her. It was unlike anything she'd ever experienced. Better than anything she'd experienced in all the memories she had, be they hers or the ones implanted in her mind. She was so close, on the verge of flying over the edge but something was holding her back. The need she felt for release was almost painful. When she thought she was going to die from the agony of it, he slammed into her in almost uncontrolled abandon before he stiffened and, with a growl, blasted his seed into her.

The world exploded around her in pleasure, her body jerking from the strength of her orgasms. They stayed locked together until her shudders slowed. As he withdrew, he laid her down on the floor and with a hungry growl, returned to Rey.

Through half-open eyes, Mira watched him run his hands over Rey's body. His touch made the Autumn Queen stir, though her gaze still showed a lack of awareness. He bent his head to nuzzle and lick Rey, his erection still hung hard and heavy between his legs, glistening the evidence of his mating with the now sated nymph.

Some part of her sluggish mind suspected that Rey was seriously hurt, unconscious in fact, despite her eyes being open. From her own experience, she knew her body had completely rebelled against her, ignoring the screaming rage she'd felt when she saw the shapeshifter taking advantage of Rey. Something had utterly rolled her mind, leaving her without thinking at all. Even now it was hard to concentrate, though it was getting better.

It hard to get a grip on what had happened. She was reasonably sure it had been rape, despite her body's complicit treachery.

There was a fuzzy memory of someone shouting something as the jaguar man had taken what her traitor body had presented him. Where was Less? The thought filtered into her mind, but she couldn't find an answer. There was blood in this room. While praying it wasn't hers, she also hoped it wasn't Less's either. Somehow that hope felt hollow.

He could be hurt or in trouble, she realized. Rey definitely was in danger of being raped the same way she had been.

"*Stop it!*" she said. "*Leave her alone! You raping, brutish, sexy...*" She shook her head, trying to blink away the memory of the most intense orgasm she'd ever experienced in her life, and then pushed herself off the floor. She grabbed Rey in her arms and pulled her away

from him again. *"It's okay, Rey. It will be okay,"* she cooed to the unconscious Autumn Queen.

Remembering the effect her voice had, she attempted to comfort Rey. Perhaps she could distract her unconscious into settling down, too.

The man simply moved forward, following Rey's body, apparently ignoring Mira's voice. He spread Rey's legs and pressed his face to her sex. With a throaty growl and a long, lingering lick, he pulled back and, in a single motion, flipped Rey face down, lifted her hips and plunged deeply into her once more.

Rey moaned and began to move undulating her hips and squirming, trying to get more, to feel more of him.

Mira crawled away from them to get behind him, then stood up and kicked him in the nuts. He grunted and hesitated for a moment, then resumed his taking of her friend.

Mira was pretty sure that should have worked. This guy was some kind of unstoppable sex machine. But she suspected he still needed oxygen to continue fucking Rey. She jumped on top of him and wrapped an arm around his neck in a rather good imitation of a sleeper hold. He slipped free, but not from her next move -- a flip that ended with them tumbling out the door with his head trapped between her thighs.

Her advantage didn't last, however. He twisted free and managed to reverse the grapple, pinning her to the ground. Mira noticed he was getting turned on and she began to feel familiar tugs in her own body's response. She considered calling on her powers of ice, but hesitated to take things to a lethal level first. She knew this guy could be very lethal and feared taking things to that level -- especially if this happened to be a village full of these guys.

Mira squirmed and then suffered the indignation of managing only an ineffectual squeak as he levered himself between her legs. Irritably, she found herself getting turned on -- again -- and this time she was embarrassingly positive it wasn't anything to do with mind control. Which then made her mad. She struggled with everything she had, all to little avail.

But then it was like his resolve had weakened. She took advantage of it to really mash a knee into his no-nos. He curled up choking and wheezing with pain so Mira wasted no time hauling Rey across her shoulders in a fireman's carry. With one last glance around to be sure she hadn't forgotten anything, she lit out across the flimsy wood and rope bridges in search of a way out of this place.

After a few wrong turns and backtracks, she found a walkway that led to within an easy jump to the ground. Rey, unfortunately, was still unconscious, and a quick check had Mira discover a now swelling lump on the side of Rey's head, hidden in her hair beneath what looked like shreds of tree bark.

Mira continued until she found the village's water source; a small stream. Checking first to make sure there were no signs of pursuit, she attempted a little first aid for Rey, giving her some water and using a strip of cloth torn from her own clothes to clean Rey's face.

Lack of clothes were a problem. When Rey had told them they would be checking out a Breach, she'd changed from her little blue dress to something more sensible for moving around in the Hedge -- jeans and a long-sleeved shirt. But she'd dropped her pants and panties in a mad rush to mate with the shapeshifter. Now she had only her shirt. She sighed. Well, Rey was pants-less, too. They could deal with being naked later, though. Right now it was time to get Rey on her feet.

Less heard the sound of tearing cloth ahead, and the splashing of water. The source of it was hidden by the thick jungle undergrowth. Less had slipped past the searching jaguar-men but, disappointingly, his down-wind route had kept him within sight of the walkways in the trees. The sound of ripping fabric didn't feel like the jaguars - they didn't wear clothes - so he cautiously peered through the leaves to see what he was dealing with. The sight of Mira tending to Rey was not what he was expecting! He didn't know what had happened that had allowed them to escape but he was over-joyed. Holding his bleeding wounds, he stumbled through the underbrush. "Mira!" he whispered loudly. "You got away!"

Startled, Mira's face whipped toward Less. Her relief was immediate and obvious. "Less!" She stood up and hugged him tight but at his reflexive moan, she loosened her grip and took a good look at him. "You're hurt," she said, worry etching her face.

She took his hand and allowed no protests as she led him a few steps more to the edge of the stream and sat him down so she could take a look at his many injuries. "I'm afraid I have little cloth to spare..." And that was an obvious fact. Even kneeling there, her shirt failed to hide the smooth curve of her backside. "I'm afraid I was so focused on getting Rey and I out of there, I completely forgot the rest of our clothes. Tear me a piece from your clothes I can use to help you while I get Rey covered." She turned away from Less to remove Rey's jacket -- unneeded in a jungle -- and tie it securely around Rey's waist. At least Rey would be granted a little dignity, even if she was still unconscious.

Less allowed himself to lay back against a large tree root and tore the arms off his shirt. He would attempt the more durable weave of his trouser legs when he felt a bit stronger.

When she turned back to take the cloth Less offered, she dipped it into the stream, wrung it out a little bit, then turned her attention to cleaning those wounds that still needed attention. "Can you tell me what happened? To you I mean. I pretty much figure out what happened to me and almost happened to Rey."

"I charged the guy who...you...who took you and Rey but three more came out of nowhere and tore me up. They chased me into the jungle but I gave them the slip. I was trying to find a place to hide and wait for an opportunity to come back for you but thankfully you got out on your own."

Mira smiled. *"I thought something had happened. I knew you would have come to the rescue. But three! Are those jaguar men still sniffing about, do you think? I don't think we can handle another encounter. I'd have to get really serious and then there would be killing and I'm not at all sure we'd survive what came after."* She looked serious. *"I still have my magic. If we can get away from here enough maybe we can open a door to the Hedge that goes somewhere other than that desert."*

Less nodded during a gasp of pain caused by Mira cinching up the bandage she was applying. "Anywhere would be better than here right now. The jaguar-men were headed back to the hut when I saw them but when they find you gone they will probably come looking. We should get moving and use this stream to cover our trail. They hunt by scent." He stood with considerable pain - he was stiffening up - and tested the bandages. "Maybe some part of the stream has a reflection in the Hedge."

Mira nodded, then hefted Rey over her shoulders again. Mira was stronger than she looked, but carrying an adult for any length of time would be tiring. *"I will need frequent breaks, but I think I can carry her a while."*

She followed Less into the stream and because she was nervous, she was more chatty than usual. *"I remember years ago before I was Taken I watched this one TV show where people were walking around in a river in a jungle and one of them told this story about this teensy little fish that can swim right up your ... where you pee and then it uses these spikes to stick in there and feed. Do you think there are any in this stream? I hope not. I wish I had pants now. Hey can you check Rey's coat to make sure she still has the Pearl? I think maybe you should carry it now because I'm not sure I'll notice if it falls out of there. Geez, Rey is heavy! Don't tell her I said that. How much do you suppose she weighs? I bet Drake would be impressed I'm carrying her through the jungle -- whoops, slippery rock."*

If Less wasn't in so much pain and feeling the stress of being hunted by crazed jaguar-sexbots, he would have laughed. Even the mention of Drake didn't darken the warmth he felt for walking through the pristine forest with Mira. He took the Pearl from Rey and really tried not to let his gaze linger more than necessary on the naked curve of her legs and buttocks under her clinging wet shirt. "My suggestion would be to hold it until we're out of the water," he said. In order to help Mira stabilize on the uncertain footing, he held her around the waist and tried to share Rey's weight.

It wasn't long before it began to get dark as the pair slowly worked their way downstream. As night fell, under the canopy of the trees, they saw lights ahead and then the sound of voices floated toward them. Whoever they were, they spoke English with American accents.

Mira veered to the left, stopped at the bank of the stream and set Rey down. *"Less, would you mind making contact with whoever that is and asking for something to cover Rey and I?"*

Less agreed and laid a comforting hand on Mira's shoulder before warily approaching the lights. He wanted to get a sense of who these people were before giving himself up to their mercy.

He approached the camp silently, and to his inexperienced eye, it looked like some kind of scientific expedition. Most of the people were in one of the large tents on the other side of the campsite, which was filled with equipment he didn't recognize. The tents closest to him appeared to be ones the people slept in, while one had screened sides for keeping the bugs out. On the table, next to a lantern turned down low, was a box of candles and a lighter.

First things first! He needed to secure those candles in order to get home. Keeping quiet and watching for any movement in the nearby tents, he crept to the table to pocket the candles and lighter. Once that was done, he inspected the mesh-sided tent to see if there was anything he could pinch for Mira and Rey. With the candles they had a way home and he would prefer to go straight back to Mythic than get involved with these scientists and have to explain his presence. Unfortunately, there were no clothes or anything else to be seen.

[I'm assuming Ritual Doorway needs 1 Glamour to open the Hollow Door.]

Less made his way back to the stream bank with his prizes. He knelt down next to where Mira was tending to Rey. "I didn't get any clothes but I found these candles. All I need to do is feed on a spark of emotion and I can get us home!"

"Oh I think I can spark some emotions. Let's hide Rey, then I'll go walking into that camp singing a song and walking along like I was on an afternoon stroll! All you have to do is be somewhere you can soak in the chaos. I mean, emotions."

"Okay, good. Give me some time to set up the ritual in that tent. Then you can whip up the emotions so we can feed. Then, while you go and get Rey, I'll start the ritual and the Door should be open by the time you get back."

Mira nodded. *"Okay if you think you won't be found out before I enter the camp."*

"It should be fine," replied Less. "I don't think they have any reason to go into that tent before they go to bed. If someone does notice, I'll stall until you can distract them."

After Less left again, she found a little hollow on the banks of the stream at a bend where the stream had carved out some earth. It was a good place for Rey to rest as it was more or less dry at this time. Then she gave him another ten minutes by counting to six hundred.

As quietly as he could, Less went to work. He had to move more slowly than normal. The

low light from the lantern did very little to hide the candles, and the mesh walls of the tent were completely see through. He was almost done, just a moment away from being able to open the Door, when he heard a young man shout "Hey you! What the hell are you doing?" A quick glance around reveal a man dressed like a college student, carrying a small cooler, staring at him.

As this information registered, people from the tent with the scientific equipment started to pour out of the tent to see what was going on.

Less ignored the young man. It was unlikely that he would turn violent before joined by the others. He continued his ritual while drinking in the man's confusion and anger. Mira would be attracted by his shouts and the movements of the other people.

Mira picked up Rey, and waded in the stream toward the camp. Until she had to leave the stream, she found the touch of water comforting. As she walked, her unconscious friend cradled in her arms, she hummed a sad little dirge, putting everything she could feel into it. It was haunting and alien, for she was still an elemental, furthest from human of all the families of changelings and the strangely entrancing quality of her voice was certain to grab the attention of any who could hear.

Rey stirred and then lashed out with a shout, fighting to get out of Mira's grasp. Mira put Rey down, never stopping her song, but took Rey by the hand in case she was unsteady. She couldn't stop, though, but pulled Rey along. If she stopped, she would never be able to draw those campers away from Less.

The Autumn Queen continued to struggle, and when she couldn't immediately get free, she suddenly shifted into her wolf form. She snapped and snarled at Mira, then hesitated as where she was and who she was with finally registered. "Mira?" she said, her voice groggy and unsure.

The nymph tried to give Rey what she thought was a reassuring smile and put a finger to her lips, but didn't stop in her dirge as she proceeded into the camp. When these people set eyes on her, she wanted their full attention, wanted them to see a naked girl that looked exactly as she was -- scuffed and dirtied from her trials, vulnerable and obviously lost. It wasn't a stretch for Mira since she was feeling all these things right now.

When the pair entered the tiny clearing and came into view, there were cries of dismay at Mira's appearance, but they were drowned out by screams of "wolf!"

Mira was dismayed. Everything would go sideways and no one would be going home unless something was done quickly. She knelt down and pulled the wolf-like creature Rey had become to her. She whispered into Rey's ear. "*Less is opening a way home in that see-through tent. Go hide, then get through his Gate at first opportunity. I will follow.*"

"No. We go together. Now." If Mira had been wearing clothes, Rey would have grabbed them with her teeth and dragged her with her toward the tent.

The bug-screened back wall of the tent swirled away to reveal a tunnel of Less' Hollow.

He stood up in the circle of candles and turned to face the gob-smacked student staring at the spectacle in his camp. "I beg your pardon, sir, but it is not polite to stare. Please avert your eyes from the poor girl."

Then he shouted and beckoned impatiently with his whole arm, "Oi! Gate's open! Time to go!"

Mira stood up again, looked around at the stares and all the eyes on her. "*Let's act casual. Just a naked girl out for a walk with her giant wolf friend in the jungle,*" she said in a low voice. She then picked up a new tune, humming an old lullaby and proceeded to walk calmly toward the tent with one hand on the wolf's shoulder. It was mostly to show onlookers that she, at least, did not consider the wolf a threat.

Rey walked at the nymph's side, and tried not to growl at the strangers. Lust was coursing through her, and she had no idea why. The urge to have sex was almost overpowering.

The scientists around them just stared as the pair strolled through the camp and joined Less in the mesh-sided tent.

Less was impatient to be gone. "This Door isn't going to stay open forever!" He beckoned them through while he eyed the young scientist to gauge whether he was adventurous enough to consider following them. If he was, Less might want to Pledge the young man into service.

"*Thank you, Less,*" Mira said with heartfelt sincerity, "*for opening a way home.*" Then she stepped through but waited on the other side for Less to guide them. Rey joined her, clearly restless.

When the young scientist made no immediate move to follow, Less stepped through the door to join the women and let the Door close behind him. He sighed loudly. "It's very good to be home! Follow me, I have some changes of clothing not far from here." He led them down a tunnel that looked to have been dug through earth, but the walls had been smoothed with clay and white-washed. He passed several dark wooden doors and finally stopped at one and forced it open. Inside looked like backstage of a large playhouse.

Rows of clothes of all description were stored on all manner of racks and shelves. What wouldn't fit on hangers were piled in boxes or simply in large heaps on the floor.

"Where did you get all of these things?" Rey asked as she shifted back to her wolf form. She stripped off what remained of her clothes and began to search for things that fit her.

"*Is this from the lost and found?*" Mira wondered as she idly went through and picked some things that might fit.

As Constable of Lost and Found, pretty much anything found in the Wardens' tunnels

could be considered the lost and found. "More precisely, the finders keepers losers weepers," he said wryly as he changed into a dark brown suit with a tweed jacket. It was amazing where his Hollow Doors had wound up over the years.

Mira watched him as he changed and was reminded of the severe injuries he suffered trying to save them from the jaguar rapists. "*We need to find you a healer,*" she stated.

Less self-consciously tugged his jacket closed over a patch of blood that was already seeping through his new shirt. He couldn't argue with Mira. Being home and safe was killing his adrenalin rush and he was fading fast.

"What happened to us?" Rey asked. "Last I remember is coming out of that old temple from the Hedge desert." She touched her temple and shivered.

"Well, there were wild boars and were-jaguars and you took a knock on the head. A jaguar ran off with you and we didn't want you to be eat, so we gave chase. Eventually we found this like, tree-house village. This guy was getting ready to rape you and you were unconscious but all staring and weird. So I charged in.

"Things get a little fuzzy for me. All I know is suddenly I wanted to fuck really bad. And then my pants were off and I had my ass in the air like a rutting whore. That guy raped me, but it was like mind control or something. My body wouldn't obey. I was screaming, but only in my head.

"Then Less heroically leaped to our rescue. He took on FOUR were-jaguars. Or maybe there were seven of them. I don't know, I was getting my brains screwed out. They hurt him really bad but he drew them all off! That gave me a chance because when that were-jaguar finished with me, he turned to you again. I was somewhat back to myself at that point, though I couldn't bring myself to harm him since my brain kept telling me he was really sexy.

"And then we wrestled and he totally had me dead to rights. I thought I was doomed to get raped again and had visions of being trapped there forever being his whore. I was really scared. But then he just suddenly, sort of got tired. So I grabbed you and ran. I didn't make time to go gathering our clothes, not with you over my shoulder and me scared to death of being trapped in that jungle with a new jaguar overlord forever."

Rey stared at Mira for a moment. "Are you still feeling the effects of that mind control?"

"No. *He's not here,*" Mira said a little vaguely. She didn't know how it worked.

"We've all been through the ringer," said Less. "We need to get you guys home before the trauma really sets in. I'm going to put in an emergency call to Tom and the Spring Court. Briarwolves and brackenpearls can wait until we've had some help."

Mira gave him a relieved smile, but in truth, she was most concerned for Less and Rey

than herself. Rey had taken that bump on her head and she worried about it being untreated for so long. She was especially worried about Less, though. They'd been in the jungle where he'd had open wounds. What horrible infections might result? She decided she wanted to make certain someone saw to that before the day was out.

"Why don't you go get your wounds dealt with, Less," Rey said. "I need to get home, and I'll get my head checked out before I meet up with you guys again."

"I lost my cell phone," Mira said to everyone's complete and utter lack of surprise, *"so I'll stick with Less since he still has his. Unless we just all want to meet someplace in, say four hours?"*

"The parking lot near the Breach," Rey replied. "Call if you're going to be late."

Mira nodded. *"Parking lot then. What time is it now?"*

Rey checked her her cell phone, but immediately put it away when she remembered she couldn't get a signal in the Hollow. Less shrugged. "Early evening maybe? We'd be a few time zones earlier than South America."

"Okay. Less, would you like me to come with you? I'm worried about those bites and scratches you got getting infected."

"Yes, I'll have Tom meet us at the motley Hollow. I'll request a Spring Courtier attend to you at your house, Rey. I wonder if any of them know anything about the possible uses for the brackenpearl/egg thing?" He recalled the weird shimmering colours of the Hedgefruit Rey had in her jacket.

"Thanks for the offer," Rey said, "but I'd rather not have other Duchy members show up at my house, not with the Door to our Hollow there." There were several other reasons - well, a dozen or so small reasons at the very least - she wasn't about to tell them about. Not yet at least. "I will get my head checked out, no worries."

Less nodded and proceeded to lead them out of the Hollow and get on with business. After the shitstorm Rey had rained down on him for concealing the presence of the Ice Princess, there was no possible way she would be hiding anything from him.

Less met Tom at the motley's Hollow to see what the good doctor could do about the lacerations and punctures he had received at the pointy ends of a few jaguars. Tom admonished Less that he needed rest and was frustrated by Less' refusal to lie still. The Winter King's anxiety was only moderately lessened when Tom explained that they had only been gone from Mythic for 5 hours. Time was mutable in the Hedge. Still, it didn't help Less' exhaustion. In the end, Tom handed Less a package of Jarmyn leaves and fruit and sent him on his way.

Tight on time, Less hurried to the train station to show his face at his mortal work-a-day job and to soak in the much-needed emotional Glamour of the confused, lonely, or stricken late-night travellers. Wearing his hat as Warden of the Bleak Seal, he was only able to post a brief memo to the Crowns (both he and Rey were included for completeness) noting their contact with the were-jaguar supernaturals. He didn't have time to file a full report, and he was too tired to figure out how he would explain what had happened in delicate terms that would not compromise Rey and Mira's honour.

Harried and frazzled, Less arrived at the Breach to find Mira sleeping on a bench at the bus stop just off the parking lot. A few moments later, he heard footsteps approaching behind him.

"Hi, Less," Rey said as she came to stand next to him. She was dressed differently than before, with what looked like steel toed work boots, very heavy denim pants, and her leather jacket over a green shirt. When she turned to get a better look at Mira, he thought he may have seen a shoulder holster under her jacket.

Mira was dressed in the same used clothes Less had found for her out of Lost and Found. It was obvious she hadn't gone home but had just come straight here. She was so deeply asleep, her mouth was slightly open and she hadn't noticed anyone standing near.

Less smiled at Rey and nodded while he touched the brim of his hat in salute. "I trust you brought the brackenpearl?" He moved next to Mira with the intention of waking her but paused to watch the beautiful girl sleep. He couldn't help think about the darkness that permeated her dreams.

"Yes," Rey said, watching Less watching Mira.

"Then we should find out what the woman in the cottage will exchange for it," said Less. His hand hovered over Mira. "I brought water this time, and some sun screen, and my candles are in a box." He was going to wake Mira by stroking her hair, but instead he gently grasped her upper arm and softly called her name.

"You may want to wait until you've heard what I learned about the pearl," Rey replied.

Mira yawned, stretched, squinted as she looked around, then rubbed her eyes. She'd been sleeping deeply so it took her a few moments of looking around to remember where she was.

"Something more than it being the egg of a giant Hedge creature?" Less asked.

"Actually, it's not," Rey said, and waited for Mira to be more awake and aware before she continued.

Mira blinked. "Egg? Do you mean the pearl?"

"The pearl isn't an egg." Rey shook her head. "I have the pearl. Less had an egg of a garganogre. The garganogre's eggs look exactly like bracken pearls, and they tend to lay them in the places where bracken pearls form."

Less shuddered at the thought of a garganogre laying eggs.

"Okay. So what exactly is the pearl? It obviously didn't come from an oyster."

"They call it a pearl because it looks like one," Rey replied. "The common theory is that the bracken where they are formed somehow drains the Glamour and life force out of anything that dies within it. In rare cases, that energy is coalesced into a pearl. Nobody knows if there is a connection between the garganogre and the pearl, or if it's just coincidence. Regardless, the pearl is very highly prized because, when prepared properly, it's believed it can be used to help things that would normally die or be destroyed outside of the Hedge to survive, or even thrive."

Less was alarmed by the news. "That's serious! Whoever the woman is in the cottage must want to leave the Hedge. It's too bad we lost the garganogre egg - it would have made a good decoy in the negotiation. I suppose it's possible that she, or someone, has been using bracken pearls on the Hedge Thorns in order to grow the Breach."

"Most likely she does. However, she also claims to be able to stop the Breach from growing, which is something we have no idea how to do ourselves. The question is, what price can we pay to have the Breach stop growing? Personally, I think we must be prepared to pay an extremely high price because allowing the Breach to grow unchecked is both dire and deadly to everyone around it."

"So, we definitely need to somehow determine her motivations behind wanting the pearl. If it is just to further the expansion of the Breach, there isn't much point in handing it over."

"How did you want to try that?" Rey asked, her curiosity plain to see.

"Well I have no idea on that. I say we just make her promise she will stop the Breach growing or she can get her own pearl. I think we know she wants to go to the Mainland, the mortal world since that's the primary use of the pearl." Mira paused. "Hey you seem much more calm now than before, Rey. Are you no longer horny?"

Rey shook her head. ["That's been taken care of."](#)

Less wished the women would keep their private conversations just that. "Uh, does this have something to do with the pearl and the Breach?" He couldn't deny, however, that Rey did appear calmer. However, she seemed to be moving as if she were sore.

"Yes, it does. I am no longer distracted and can put all my concentration and attention on what we're doing," Rey said. "I also contacted Chase and let him know that we've found a

potential solution to stop the Breach's influence on the area."

Mira recalled a time when Rey and Chase had been an item. It wasn't so long ago that she'd found them together and then decided Rey needed her privacy. That was about when she found her own place with Remy's help. *"He might have been useful..."* She stopped going further for the sake of Less's tender, sometimes Victorian, sensibilities.

A smile appeared for a moment on Rey's lips. "Oh, he was."

Mira returned her smile, then returned to the problem at hand. *"What do you think about dealing with the woman in the Hedge and the bracken pearl?"*

"You said the woman wanted the pearl in exchange for giving you what was needed to prevent the Hedge from spreading," Rey said. "Did she give any indication to you that she even cared about the spread? It could be she's just doing a business transaction, telling you what she wanted in exchange for her help."

"I don't think the Breach spreading was particularly concerning to her personally, no. And yes of course it seemed like transaction. I want something she can provide, she asked for something in return." She paused, then said, *"Maybe we should be more concerned about the creatures we know are taking advantage of the widening breach. The briarwolves."*

Rey looked at Less to see what he had to say.

"The worrying part is that someone is controlling the Hedge around that cottage. Perhaps the woman will negotiate faithfully to get the pearl, but she might not let us leave with the information. Let's be sure we bring some fire with us so that Mira can control it if need be."

"I don't have a lighter or matches," Rey said. "Sorry."

Less patted his pocket. "Oh, I've got those for my ritual candles. I was just thinking that we could get something a bit more reliable - like a lantern, a butane torch or even a small propane barbeque. If you give me 20 minutes I can get something from a nearby hardware store."

"You sure that's a good idea?" Rey frowned. "The Hedge might object." She'd seen the Hedge retaliate against an attack, and it definitely wasn't pretty.

Mira interjected, *"I don't think it's plan A, but if things go sideways I think Less is right in that we should be prepared. Preparations for fire are a lot easier to move than a bathtub full of water. If we have to fight, fire is probably a better option."*

"Exactly, we're not going to start with burning the Hedge," explained Less. "But if the Hedge grabs me like it did last time I tried to approach the cottage, I don't want to have to try to strike a match in my pocket to get fire for Mira to control."

"Maybe only one person was supposed to go to the cottage," Rey suggested.

"Maybe. Just wait here." Less trotted off and before long returned with a compact portable barbeque with a full propane bottle. He lit one of the burners, wired the lid closed, and carried it by one of its handles. "All set. Let's go negotiate for the safety of Mythic City."

Mira blinked at Less. That didn't seem very safe at all. But he was her elder by how many of her own lifetimes? He must know what he was doing, she decided, and instead lined up with him to be ready to head to the Breach.

"You lead the way," Rey said. There was no way she wanted to get blasted from behind when that thing went off.

"Safe as houses," muttered Less as he strode past Rey and Mira into the Breach. He paused to make sure they made it through the hole in Reality before continuing along the path that, last time they were here, led Mira to the strange woman's cottage.

They made their way to the cottage, and the Hedge around them was eerily quiet, and the plants seemed more dangerous than before. As the changelings walked down the path, the grill in Less' hand got hotter and hotter. When the cover got too hot for the proximity of his fingers, he switched to holding the barbeque by one of its wire legs.

As they reached the cottage, he set it safely down on one of the paving stones that kept the weeds at bay in front of the house. "Mira, since you made the initial deal, perhaps you should be the one to introduce us to the woman in the cottage."

"*I'd be delighted.*" It was hard to tell from her tone if she was being serious or not, but her face seemed serious.

Less brushed off his suit and straightened his tie in hopes of making a good impression.

The door opened a few moments after Mira knocked to reveal the woman the nymph had talked to before. A wide, delighted smile covered the woman's face. "Well, hello again." The scent of baking pies wafted around the motley.

"Hello," Mira said with a smile. "*I've been thinking about our last conversation, and my friends and I have the item that interested you. But I was wondering, should we strike a bargain, how you might stop the breach into the mortal realm from growing?*"

"As I told you before, I cannot do it," the woman said, reminding Mira of their previous conversation.

"*I beg your pardon,*" Mira said. "*I am still sleepy. You said you could tell me how the breach might be stopped from spreading for the price of a bracken pearl. We have discovered such a thing and are interested in making a trade; the bracken pearl for knowledge of how*

the breach might be stopped from spreading."

"Then give me the pearl," the woman replied. "And I will give you what you need for the job." As she extended her hand, the tall thorned bushes around the clearing the cottage stood in because to rustle and writhe. Fear flashed for a moment on the woman's face before becoming impassive again.

Mira frowned and turned to look around them. "*Who is there?*" she demanded. Less recognized the mocking laughter from when the thorned hedge reached out and grabbed him.

"Hurry," the woman said in a rushed tone. "He'll be here soon and I won't be able to help."

Mira made a snap decision. She had a very good sense about what a good bargain was, and what was a bad bargain. Her instinct told her this woman was not, in this one thing, attempting to deceive them. "*The bargain is struck.*" She glanced to her friends. "*Please give her what she asked for.*"

Rey approached and took the pearl out of her pocket and handed it to the woman. The woman took it, and rapped it against the doorframe, then smiled. "Wait right there. I'll get you what I offered." She disappeared into the depths of her cottage, but returned just a moment later holding a drawstring bag, which she offered to Mira.

"Inside are two spikes and the hammer you need. Drive these into the ground about ten feet from the furthest end of the hedgeplants that are emerging from the Breach. They cannot go past the spikes."

Mira took the pouch and inclined her head deferentially. Then she asked, "*Can the wolves or others more foolish remove them by intent or incompetence?*"

"Pound them deep enough into the ground, so their tops are flush with the pavement," the woman said, obviously not looking at the hedgerow that appeared to be growing and becoming more menacing. "They could not be accidentally removed, and they will have to put in great effort to take them out."

"*Good advice.*" Mira looked around calmly, then focused on the woman again. "*Good day,*" she said, knowing the woman was eager to have them -- and whatever stalked them -- away from her home.

"Hurry," the woman said, her eyes wide and fearful as she closed the door. The motley heard the bolt being drawn.

"But--" The door slammed in Less' face as he was composing his question. He turned with his motley mates as they began to return to the Breach. "I was going to ask why there are two stakes. How are they supposed to be positioned in relation to each other?"

"*We'll just have to figure it out,*" Mira said with some confidence. In truth her mind was more on what was stalking them just now.

Less decided that was as good as they were going to get, grabbed the barbeque, and hurried after them.

The motley moved quickly but, to their dismay, they saw the hedgerow surrounding the cottage starting to grow and close off the path to trap them inside.

Mira and Rey managed to dive through unscathed, but the hedge clutched and snagged at Less! Mira turned and grabbed his outstretched arm. With a bit of effort, he popped free, landing right on top of Mira. He might have wondered if she did that on purpose but for the surprise on her face.

"*Oof!*" she said when he landed. With a laugh, she said, "*Guess I don't know my own strength.*"

Less was embarrassed by his predicament and intimate proximity to Mira. He tried to extract himself and managed to make matters worse when his hands found purchase on soft, warm flesh.

Rey stood over them and offered her hands to help them up. Less grabbed one as if it were a lifeline. "That was a close one," he breathed as he looked back at the threatening thorns. "Is the Hedge attacking us or the cottage?" If it was the cottage, he wanted to get out while the getting was good.

"I think it may have been trying to trap us by the cottage," Rey said.

Mira's grin as she climbed to her feet was mischievous. But she was more serious when she spoke. "*We should keep moving in case it tries to trap us again. Or in case whatever is manipulating the Hedge decides instead to manipulate us. Unpleasantly.*"

The three friends hurried down the path toward the Breach, and Mira and Less saw movement out of the corners of their eyes. Less turned his head slightly in the direction of the movement and saw what could only be a pair of briarwolves. They were moving stealthily in a parallel path to the motley, moving through the thorns with relative ease.

"Briarwolves!" hissed Less as he forced himself to run faster. "They're trying to cut us off. Mira, you have to get ahead of them to pound in the stakes. Rey and I can try to stop them at the Breach."

Mira raced ahead as fast as she could to try to make it to the Breach before the wolves caught them.

The wolves kept pace with Less and Rey, matching their speed and direction. Less used his control over air to encourage the fire in the grill he was carrying. For a few moments, the barbecue became a blast furnace. The metal body glowed red and singed Less fingers on the leg mere inches away. He hurled the smoking thing into the Hedge ahead of the wolves in an effort to slow them down.

The trees and plants of the Hedge rose up en masse to block the flying superheated grill and sent it flying straight back at Less. He managed to duck without missing a step and it bounced into the undergrowth next to the path with a clatter.

Mira reached the edge of the Breach without any trouble, with Less and Rey close behind. She leaped out of the Breach, skidding to a halt not far from the entrance. Before she pulled out the mallet and stakes, she took a quick look around to see if anyone or anything was lurking nearby. She appeared to be alone, at least for now. Eyeballing as best she could, she got a stake out along with the mallet, then set the first stake. She did her best to pound it in through the pavement with strength and accuracy.

Less skidded to a stop just outside the Breach and whirled around with his sword flashing menacingly to slow the advance of the pursuing wolves. Except they did not advance. They stayed back, watching the motley, and that suited him perfectly.

Once she got one stake pounded all the way down, flush with the pavement, she quickly moved to the other side of the breach, lined up the edge, and pounded in the next stake. Less was surprised that the briarwolves made no move to prevent Mira's actions. They stayed where they were inside the Breach. Warily, Less backed away. He felt that the spikes would form the boundary where the Breach would be contained, and he wanted to be beyond that when Mira finished pounding.

Less backed out to the Mainland through the Breach, keeping an eye on the Briarwolves. When he looked over to where Mira now stood, he saw something glinting beneath the roots and plantlife growing out of the Breach. He tried to determine what it was he could see as he continued to back away, beyond the spikes, but the root growth was so thick he couldn't see anything else from where he was.

Less looked at the Breach, with the Briarwolves and its thorny growths, then to the spike Mira had nailed flat into the ground and the one she now held in her hand. "Are you waiting for an invitation? No time like the present to end a Reality-engulfing rift in the Hedge!"

Mira kept pounding away. "*These things really go in hard,*" she muttered.

"Do you want some help with that?" Rey asked.

"*No. I'd probably only mash your hand. There is only one mallet and this is the last stake,*" Mira said.

"I wonder why the Briarwolves are just waiting at the Breach," mused Less as he tapped his feet with impatience. "Maybe they don't like bleeding into Reality any more than we liking an encroaching Hedge."

Mira paused. *"Maybe they are waiting for something?"*

"Don't stop!" cried Less. "If they are waiting for something, we should *hurry!*"

Mira promptly finished pounding the last spike into place. *"Done,"* she announced. She looked around to see if there was any immediate effect. She could see the nearest end of the faerie-born foliage begin to writhe. As she watched, tendrils shot out from the ends, rapidly growing in size and length until they touched the spike she'd driven into the pavement. A huge knot of roots formed, covering and hiding the spike head completely.

She blinked at it. It had grown. *"Hey! Is that supposed to happen? I think it grew."*

"It didn't go beyond the spikes, so that's encouraging," said Less. He took a wary step back as the Hedge piled up in front of them.

Mira stared at the spike she had just pounded in, getting down on hands and knees to do so. She eyed it suspiciously, pushed and prodded the stubborn vines, and then finally sat back. *"I can't believe this. Less, Rey -- we've been had! These spikes use faerie magic of a type that attracts Hedge growth. We just expanded this breach. We have to remove these. And now I wonder if there aren't more spikes here somewhere that caused the Breach to grow in the first place!"*

"Rrgh!" grunted Less in frustration. "How is that possible? She blatantly said they would *prevent* the expansion of the Breach!" Less tried to exert control over the Hedge, willing his Winter nature to wither the vines. To his dismay, the plants seemed to heal themselves as quickly as he harmed them.

"We were certainly led to believe that. But we also have no way of knowing if she was even fae. She could also have lied. But none of that matters. What does matter is that I know these spikes are not helping. They are making things worse and we have to remove them." She looked to Rey. *"I'd like to accept that help now, if the offer is still good. Let's get rid of these that I just put in and look for more."*

"I'll do my best," Rey replies, and heads to the location of one of the two spikes the nymph had pounded into the pavement.

Mira dug at hers, managing to yank it free with brute strength. She shoved it into the bag it came out of, and the faerie-born plants immediately shriveled and died back to where they were before Mira had pounded the spike into the ground.

Less was at a loss of what to do. Rey could probably manage the second stake with her

claws but he followed her in case his Contract of Stone could be useful. He would like to now investigate further the strange glinting he saw in the foliage before he left the Breach but he was still smarting from his defeat at the hands of the jaguars. He didn't feel he was up to challenging a pair of Briarwolves on his own.

He felt a hand on his shoulder and turned to see Mira show him a brief smile. *"I've got this. Here. You help Rey."* Then she turned toward the breach, her body icing over and becoming semi-translucent. Deadly cold flowed in the air around her as she prepared to defend her motley.

Less took the bag from Mira and jogged over to Rey. "Can I help?" He tried getting another look of the thing he saw in the vines. "Have you seen anything odd in the growth there?"

Rey didn't respond until after she'd pried the spike out of the ground and handing it to him. "Sorry, I didn't see anything." Just like when Mira pulled the spike out, the roots and vines died back to the point where they were before.

At that moment, a terrifying, echoing howl resonated out through the Breach and into the alley, and Mira could see rapid movement in the dense foliage. It was heading straight for the Breach - and the motley beyond. She stepped forward, directly in the line of attack.

Four briarwolves tore past Mira, bouncing off trees and roots to avoid the elemental's flames and into the alley to launch themselves at Rey and Less. Two went after Rey, but she moved out of the way as if she was dancing. The other two attacked Less but caught nothing but his peacoat.

Less quickly retaliated with his sword, opening a long wound along the briarwolf's rib cage. Mira helped put pressure on the creature with a deathly, cold claws of ice that tore a vicious gash in the creature's hindquarters.

Mira cried out and stumbled a little when something hit her. It was followed by the sound of a small explosion, like that of a rifle or large caliber pistol. The blow had turned her and Less could see a black mark where something had hit her square in the middle of her back.

Less hoped she could handle herself as he manoeuvred himself around to place the briarwolves between him and the sniper. He pressed the attack against the wounded wolf, getting only a glancing blow despite magically enhancing his strength. Between him and Mira's ice-claws, one wolf went down, a shredded, bleeding mess.

Of course, Mira was again reminded of the sniper as she took another shot in the back. *"Oof!"* she complained. It was really starting to hurt. She decided it was time to get out of view of that gateway. *"Guys, we have a sniper in there. We can come back here in force later, but right now I don't feel like getting shot anymore."*

"Tactical fighting retreat!" called Less. He slashed threateningly at the wolf he fought and tried to get some distance from it. At the same time, he tried to spot the shooter in the Breach. Preventing further shots would be key to their escape.

Although anxious to get out of line of site of the breach, Mira retreated in an orderly fashion, keeping pace with Less, but warily watching for further attacks from wolves or sniper. Rey followed, never turning her back on their attackers.

The wolves moved to the boundaries of the breach but went no further. They stood there, watching the motley retreat.

Once they were clear, Mira let out a breath. *"I think someone powerful is making that woman set people up to expand the breach. We should show this mallet and spike around and tell them what's happening here to drum up some support. Then I think we can remove the rest."* Her back was hurting and she shifted uncomfortably. *"We can get someone with earth magic to put up a wall or something to prevent those wolves and sniper from interfering, too."*

Less agreed. "Yes, that seems pretty clear, someone with access to and training with a rifle. A changeling, probably. The role of the woman in the cottage puzzles me a little bit. If it were her job to hand out mallets to people trying to close the Breaches, why send us on a deadly wild goose chase for a bracken pearl? Her way of rebellion?" He didn't really expect answers to his musings. It was just something that didn't sit right with him as he pondered why he had not previously heard of anyone receiving the spikes to prevent Breach expansion.

"Mira went to her, looking for a way to prevent the Breach from spreading," Rey said, and looked to Mira. "Did she actually come right out and say the spikes were what we needed to stop the Breach from expanding?"

Mira shook her head. *"She said she knew how it would be done and that is what we bargained for. But no she never said the spikes would stop the expansion. It remains to be seen whether what she gave me will give us what we need to prevent the breaches from growing."*

"She did say she would give us what we needed to stop the spread of the Breach," said Less. "Then she gave you the bag and said that the hammer and spikes were what we needed. It seemed pretty straight forward at the time, but maybe once she handed over the bag she was free to tell us anything. Maybe it's only the bag we need to stop the Breaches from growing."

"Problem with that is when the spike was put in, the Breach expanded," Rey said. "And removing the spike caused it to die back. And then we were attacked when we started removing the spikes. It sounds to me like removing the spikes might be the key to shrinking the Breach. Maybe even all the other Breaches. I don't think anyone ever thought to search for spikes or any other physical thing that might be the cause of their

staying open to begin with."

Mira nodded. *"That could well be it. Then all we need to do now, is make sure the other courts are aware of this so that these breaches can be dismantled."*

"And Less can do that pretty quickly, with his contacts and network," Rey added.

"Of course. I'll get the world out immediately." He pulled out his phone, his lifeline.

Within hours, word had spread. Over the next year, the Breaches were searched and the spikes found and removed. Now without ties to the mortal world, the Breaches all eventually faded and closed.

(And thus we find ourselves at the end of *Mythic Changeling*. The stories will continue on the wiki....)