

Happy Birthday Rey

Saturday Evening, March 3, 2012

Music blared in Rey's living room as she shimmied and shook from her bedroom to the bathroom. Tonight she was going out with Richard to celebrate her birthday, and he was deliberately vague about what they would be doing other than "celebrate". She managed to wheedle a "dress casual" out of him, so she decided to be satisfied with that.

They went out so rarely as a couple, and Rey wanted it to be special, so rather than her usual jeans and a shirt, she decided to wear a skirt. She'd worn it before and she knew it was one Richard liked. A matching blouse, thigh-high stockings and her favorite granny boots rounded out her outfit. The finishing touch, however, was the necklace he'd given her for Valentine's Day. The chain was long enough that the pendant could be tucked inside the neckline of her top if need be.

The ten minute warning she'd set up for her went off, and she did a quick last minute check of her makeup, and then she was ready for Richard to arrive to pick her up.

The big changeling arrived right on time. He'd barely finished ringing the bell the second time when Rey opened the door.

He had managed to stuff himself into a white shirt with brown vest. On top he wore a tweed jacket and a bow tie. His style was decades out of date if ever it had actually been in style but his efforts were obvious right down to his corduroy pants and shined, brown leather shoes.

He leaned toward her, "Good evening, Rey. You look lovely." A smile pulled at his lips.

"Thanks, handsome! I hope the music didn't deafen you too badly." She went up on her tiptoes to give him a quick kiss. Rey didn't dare say anything about his clothes, for fear of ruining the evening. "I thought we were going casual. Should I go change?" She looked down at the burnt orange skirt and blouse that flattered both her figure and her coloring.

"Ah, no," he said. "I was going for well-dressed casual." His fashion car had missed the 'well-dressed' turn and then somehow managed to also smash through the guard rails of 'casual' as well. But he'd tried pretty hard. Heaven knows where he found that suit.

"If you are ready?" He offered her his arm.

She grabbed her purse with one hand while wrapping the other lovingly around forearm. At least his clothes matched, she told herself as she pulled the door closed behind her.

Seeming pleased with her reaction to his outfit, he helped her into his jeep and they headed south out of town. Soon they were passing through Santa Fe until he stopped at a familiar ranch. It was Stormfront's home. As they left the jeep and made their way to the front door, Rey could hear voices and the sound of music coming from inside.

"This was the last place I expected to be tonight," Rey said, but the smile on her lips and merriment in her eyes showed she was most certainly pleased by the turn of events.

His smile grew bigger and he ushered her to the house. Lyla answered the door with Chaska at her side. She was dressed in a gorgeous blue dress that was sure to simultaneously show off her best assets and put any other woman to shame. But the pleased look in her eyes and the compliments on her lips made Rey forget about that and feel like the star of the show.

"Happy birthday, Rey," Lyla said with a pretty smile and a kiss on the cheek. Chaska actually hugged her, and he was usually not a hugger.

Then Rey found a glass of wine in her hand as well as Richard's and they were drawn into the main room of the house. There were no other werewolves in sight, but Rey found the room populated with her closest friends. Mira was radiant in a sea foam dress Rey had made her. Amber stood next to her with a glass as well. The girl had a big smile on her face and Rey had to immediately worry if someone had given the underage youth alcohol. But then her eyes caught sight of Jesse. She was back in clothes reminiscent of those she used to wear back in Eldon Well. They had the dark, goth tones of her old favorites, but updated and more mature, if still flirty with nylon stockings and short skirt. Alexei sat nearby, climbing to his feet as Rey entered the room. He presented Rey with a bottle of wine.

Less approached and handed Rey and Marie gift-wrapped packages. They were clearly not the same present duplicated. He had decided on Rey's personally but had relied on Claire's advice for Marie's. "Many happy returns of the day!" he said happily. He wasn't wearing the hedgespun suit Rey had made him - he tried to save that for official Winter King business. Instead, he was dressed in a suit of his preferred grey. It was not the usual thread-bare he had worn for years but a new hedgespun item. Vaguely Victorian with a frock coat and vest, it seemed as if it were a stormy sky with billowing clouds. While not revealing, it was somehow gauzy enough that his multiple eyes and mouths were visible through the fabric.

Rey's hands were full of wine when Marie swept in for a hug and a boisterous "Happy birthday to us!"

"To us," Rey replied with a laugh and returned the hug as best she could. "If I'd known I'd have been seeing you tonight, I'd have brought your gift."

Marie raised her glass as feel and joined in her sister's toast.

Rey disengaged from her sister's embrace and turned to Alexei. "I never thought I'd ever see you outside of your club," she said with a friendly laugh. She set what she was holding down on the small table near her and took one of his hands in hers. "I'm really glad you could make it."

She picked up the gift Less had given her and gave it a careful but playful shake, listening to see if it made any noise. A heavy weight shifted inside but any clunk was muffled by tissue paper. "Nice new suit, Less," she said to him, giving him a quick look over. "I must commend your tailor."

"Much obliged, Rey," he replied as he showed it off self-consciously. He deflected the attention he was getting to Rey's gift. "I hope you like it."

"I'm sure I will." Rey looked over at Marie. "Shall we open these now, or wait until later?"

"If we wait, we will only get older!" Marie said with a grin.

Rey laughs. "I guess we'd better start then."

The twins tore off the wrappings --

Rey let the tissue fall away from a large pair of industrial seamstress scissors - the type with painted black handles. They looked a little worse for wear to most attending, with spots of rust on the six-inch blades and the black paint was well-worn. However, the changelings present saw gleaming silver eight-inch shears with Norwegian runes etched in the blades. The upper handle was forged in the shape of a bear's head.

Marie's package was smaller and when she slipped the lid off the colourful cardboard box she saw the black leather bracelet inside. It's aesthetic was Harley-Davidson? chic but between the silver rivets on the edges was an elaborate silver athame. Marie's eyes sparkled with wonder and delight. It was plain to see she loved

the gift immediately. "Thank you so much Mr. Seleman. This is extraordinary." She looked at him with respect and not a little wonder at his excellent judgement of what she'd like.

"Please, call me Less. A sister of Rey's is practically a sister of mine." He tweaked the brim of his hat.

"Are you trying to tell me you want me to make you more clothes, Less?" Rey teased her motley mate as she gave him a quick hug. "These are beautiful. I can hardly wait to try them out."

"Of course, if you have time," said Less from a mouth unencumbered from the entangling hug. "I'm told they proved very useful to their former owner."

"I'll see what I can do," Rey replies. "A Zoot Suit, perhaps?" Her eyes twinkle with mischief.

Less scratched his chin as he imagined himself in a gangster look. "Yes," he said dreamily. "Pin-striped, perhaps..."

Amber presented her gifts. For Marie, a charm bracelet Amber had put together together with a letter which Marie read carefully while Amber examined the floor. Afterwards, Marie hugged Amber.

Then she gave Rey her gift. It was a beaded necklace and matching pair of earrings, also something Amber had put together herself. The changeling hugged the young woman in thanks. "They're lovely. I know exactly which outfit I'm going to wear them with first."

Richard awkwardly handed Marie a gift card. Marie read it and then gave him a look. Richard's face turned red and he stuttered. "I uh... thought you'd like that?"

She let him dangle a moment longer, pinning him with a glare. Richard shifted uncomfortably. "Um. Sorry..."

Marie burst out, "Beer of the month club? Seriously? I love it!" She grinned at him and the big guy breathed relief.

"You're welcome." he said meekly.

Then he looked over to Mira. She nodded and smiled. "*I usually only do this when I go into a fight where I think I'm probably going to die. But for you two, I'll try something just a little different. This is something I remember hearing once a long time ago, though I couldn't say when or where.*" She then broke into a slow, beautiful song. The language was flowing and complex, probably something Celtic. It gave the impression of love given, lost, then given again.

While Mira presented her gift to the sisters, Richard presented Rey with his own; a bouquet of ever-blooming lilies. "Although they are cut, they will bloom every night and close every day for the turn of a season," he said, "and will remain fresh until the day they close and never open again."

Rey looked from the flowers to his face, then raised herself up onto her tiptoes and pressed her lips to his. The kiss was chaste, but full of love and promise.

Lyla and Chaska presented their gifts; an evening gown in Rey's size and a matching coat. Both were expensive and made of natural silks and fur. They gave Marie an old, leather-bound book that Lyla said contained occult knowledge best left in the hands of someone best equipped to do something with it. Jesse gave Rey and Marie each a monogrammed fountain pen.

Rey thanked her friends, and went digging in her purse to find something to try out her new pen on. She found the card that had come in the mail earlier in the day. She'd tucked in her purse and forgotten about it. Her name and address was on it, but no indications whom it may have come from. She carefully opened the

envelope and looked inside. She removed a card with a picture of a mated pair of wolves, tenderly nuzzling each other. There were no words anyway, but inside the card was a single paw print. It looked just like the one she had in the small of her back.

"What is it?" Marie asked, reading Rey's face. "Who is it from?"

Rey turned the envelope over to look at the postmark. It was from Mythic. "An old boyfriend," Rey said with a half sad, half exasperated sigh. "Likes to stir up trouble." She felt a small stab of guilt, knowing that she needed to talk to Chase and officially break it off with him.

Rey put the card back in the envelope and put it and the pen in her purse.

"It was him, wasn't it?" Mira said. *"It's my fault. He wouldn't have known but for me. I went through him to contact Lyla and Chaska."*

"Don't worry about it," Rey assured her friend. She looked down at Richard's lilies and the smile returned to her face. "It just reminds me I need to call him."

Lyla's eyes shifted to Rey. "He giving you a hard time?" she asked softly.

"Not really. I've spoken with him twice, maybe three times since we went our separate ways. This is the first time he's contacted me." Rey shrugged. "Chase is being Chase. It should be easy enough to straighten things out." At least Rey hoped it would be.

Richard watched the exchange with a frown, but didn't say anything.

Less raised his glass. "Speech! Speech!"

"So nice of you to volunteer." Rey grinned at him.

"I believe it is customary for the birthday-girl to say something, but I will propose a toast. To Rey, who is generous with her strength, determination, knowledge and love! And to Marie, who has come to us only this year but with whom we hope to share many more!"

The gathered guests all found glasses and raised them to an affirmative chorus.

A few minutes after the toast, Richard's cell phone rang. He appeared a little surprised, apologized, then dug it out. He stepped into the guest room to take the call. Five minutes after that, Richard returned looking shaken and haunted. He approached Rey and mumbled, "I'm sorry Rey. I have to go. I'll call you later."

Rey put a hand on his arm. "Are you okay?" She'd never seen him so...perturbed before.

He nodded. He already had his coat in hand when he'd returned from the guest room where most had been leaving coats and jackets. He put a smile on but his eyes were worried. "I'm really sorry about this. All of it." Then while Rey looked surprised, he turned and quickly left the house.

Rey felt a hand on her shoulder. When she turned it was Mira's concerned face that greeted her with concerned eyes.

"Something's wrong," Rey murmured. "Why would he apologize?"

"Because he feels guilty about something," Mira signed in Glymjack. She smiled at Rey to cheer her up. "And he should! He wouldn't let me bring in the ice sculpture I made of you and Marie. But I couldn't bring myself to destroy it. It's on the back patio."

"Richard wouldn't let you bring in the ice sculpture," Rey replied, letting herself be distracted by Mira. "Has Marie seen it yet?"

The ice nymph shook her head. "I don't think so."

"Well then, let's corral her and go outside to take a look."

A small group of curious guests followed the three to the patio just off the kitchen for a look at what Mira had crafted. There, just off the wood deck in the center of the cement patio at the foot of the stairs was a half-sized statue of Marie and Rey. They sparkled in the porch light shining down.

Lyla chuckled. Chaska and Less had to move in for a better look. Everyone went silent for a moment as they took in the art. The human forms of Rey (in this case her human Mask) and Marie wrapped around each other in an affectionate, nude embrace. The attention to detail was practically classical Greek in its accuracy and idealism, although one had to admit the subjects were already very close to the ideal in any case. Mira had managed to capture expressions of relief, disbelief and happiness on the twins faces, as if they'd found each other after having been missing for ages. Coiled about their feet, as if having been cast off, were lengths of rope.

Amber remarked. "Geez Mira. I didn't even know you were an artist. That's really good."

Mira was standing behind the group near the door. She looked down and said, *"It's... a skill I picked up recently."*

Rey was surprised at Mira's reply, and curious as to why Xavier would have had her learn sculpture, but now was neither the time nor the place to ask her about that. There was something, she thought, was okay to ask. "Who did you get to model for you?"

"Uh... Amber. With some artistic interpretation."

Amber's mouth dropped, then she went for a closer look at the sculpture, squinting at the bodies.

Marie laughed. "Liar. Honey, I think you got a pretty good look at me at Blood Tears that night you and Rey visited and Carson and I had you to ourselves for a while."

Mira's cheeks burned red and Amber stood ramrod straight and flipped Mira a disbelieving stare. Lyla tossed an arm around Mira's shoulders and said, "Nothing wrong with having an appreciation for the human body. Besides, you pulled this off pretty tastefully."

Lyla's familiarity and attempt to defend her only made the nymph more self-conscious and embarrassed.

Rey held back a laugh. "Lyla's right. You've got nothing to be ashamed of. It's beautiful. Some license with me, though, as I don't think you've ever seen me naked looking like that." She hoped Mira would figure out she was referring to having her Mask hardened.

Mira brightened with a smile. *"I was hoping I wasn't too far off in using Marie as a model for both of you. And I wanted to use what you both looked like on the inside, not just the outside, because I think the most pure heart is the human heart. Whatever else you both may be that I was unable to capture, the most beautiful parts of you are totally human. When I saw you two together for the first time last Christmas, it just looked to me like you both were finally complete somehow. That's what I was trying to say with the statue."*

Less admired the sculpture and appreciated its artistic qualities. "Mira, I had no idea you could make such beautiful sculptures. I was going to have the ice sculptures for the Spring Welcome party done by a professional artist but would you consider taking the commission instead?"

"Really?" Mira looked at Less in surprise. "*I mean I'd be honored!*" The idea that she might do something that would let her be known as something other than the mouth of the Autumn Queen lit her eyes.

"Good! I'll set up a meeting for you with Squire Lyre. He's doing most of the planning. He'll get you in touch with the creative consultant from Spring, but judging from this one, I'm sure they'll be happy with your work."

Rey nodded with a smile. "That's what I saw," she said in reference to Mira's explanation of the sculpture. She looked over at her sister, and remembered something she wanted to talk to her about. "Hey Marie, can I talk to you for a second?"

"Sure," Marie said and sauntered over. As she did, she said, "Thanks Mira. I'm going to take a bunch of pictures before it melts if that's okay."

She joined Rey and they stepped away from the guests. "What's on your mind?" she asked her twin.

"I've been thinking about it for a while, and I'd like to take you up on the offer you made a while ago," Rey said softly. "Spending time with Aurra, Yvonne and your other friends. If the invitation is still open."

Marie nodded and smile. "Of course, Rey. Once a witch, always a witch," she said with a wink.

The Ice Queen

Tuesday, March 6, 2012

Claire had appeared the morning of the sixth to give Less a report on what she'd discovered about Ishtar's coven. She told him that broadly, the coven acts to protect and promote each other, something like a fraternity might. They help each other socially and financially and presumably, the inner circle also helps each other grow mystically.

As a group they meet twice a month, typically on the evening nearest the full moon and new moon. During the full moon meetings, Ishtar herself appears with a lot of fanfare and supernatural wows. Mortals are very impressed when she appears in the stone circle at Iron Mountain Park. It seems likely that Ishtar has some sort of Door there, but Claire told Less she didn't want to explore that possibility without backup. If the Spring Queen had guardians on the other side of the Hedge there to protect that Door, then it could be a problem investigating it.

Ishtar's witches who don't have powers of their own (which is most of them) often receive them from Ishtar. She heard that those mortal followers of Ishtar whose faith is strong enough can often receive magical blessings from the goddess in their dreams. Claire told him that this requires that the follower take a pledge of devotion to Ishtar.

That's where her investigation had to stop, unfortunately. As a changeling, she couldn't afford to tip her hand by taking the pledge and since her magic was very different from the witches', she could not safely approach the inner circle.

This report, then, had to do.

She did have a question for Less. "Sir, now that we have a grasp of Ishtar's cult, did you have another project for me?"

"Excellent work, Claire. I'm glad you're safe and sound. I do have a few projects on the go. The most urgent is the vampire Xavier Klein and his mental manipulations of my motley-mate, Mira. I'm expecting Worm to report on her surveillance but we have yet very few leads. I'm wondering if Mira's past somehow influenced the vampire's interest in her. It might give us some clue as to their intentions. Could you try to dig up something on Mira, or Mizuko. Not much to go on, I'm afraid."

"I beg your pardon on this, sire, but I have already done so. I hope it does not upset you for me to say so, but I have already done background checks on all the members of your motley out of concern for your security since you became King." She bowed low.

The draconic changeling had deeply impressed Less once again. "No, I appreciate the diligence," he managed after the shock of her competence wore off. "Carry on."

"I can give a verbal report now. Give me an hour to retrieve it and I can give you a file with some photos I dug up with help from Worm as well." She cleared her hoarse throat and began her report.

"Her real name is Irene Naida. I suspect Mira is well aware of the power of true names. Not all changelings give it much heed, but they should. For mortals, true names are their birth names, and that's true for many changelings as well. Sometimes, though, a changeling will be given a new true name by their Keeper, or they could claim a new one themselves even though such changes are hard on changeling's psyche. In her case, I estimate only a 40% chance that Irene Naida remains her true name.

"She was born and raised in the city of Detroit until she ran away from home at fifteen years of age. That, in fact, is how we managed to trace her. Her face shows up on missing persons reports and even milk cartons from that time. From there she disappears for several years. It's impossible to say what all happened to her, but we can definitely say that her fetch returned home to her family where it has remained in her guise for the past four years.

"Her parents are Shinju and Marie Naida. Mr. Naida is a Japanese businessman and is away a great deal. She has a twin brother named Hugo. He's a classic over-achiever. Brilliant, athletic. I'd say that between them she got the looks and he got the brains. But there must have been some pretty high expectations put on her she was unable to meet and possibly problems between her and her mother or she wouldn't have left home. Those were the least of her problems at the time, though.

"Irene Naida has some interesting medical history. Her records are sealed of course, but more interesting to us is *whereshe'd* received treatment. Her mother had apparently checked her in to a clinic for young people who suffer from drug abuse.

"However, when the fetch returned to her family she was of course clean and sober. It integrated into the family quite well and soon completed her GED and went on to college where it appears to be achieving respectable grades and keeping mom and dad happy.

"Meanwhile the real Irene was Taken as we know. If she really had a drug problem then her Durance would surely have sobered her up as well or better than any trip to a high-priced clinic.

"Everything else is rather hazy. How she came to be in Mythic is a complete mystery. I can only assume that she had some connection strong enough to make it through the Hedge, but why she came here instead of Detroit I have no idea. I even went so far as to try to make connections with the freehold in Detroit. But every inquiry has come back negative — none of the Great Courts there have ever heard of her or seen her,

nor has any of the Courtless that were willing to speak to me. That doesn't necessarily mean that she didn't go straight home, though. Finding her fetch there living her life probably better than she ever had would have been a blow. She could have immediately fled, stealing away on the first train west she could find and not stopping until she got to Mythic." Claire shrugged. "Anything is possible.

"Since her arrival here, however, there has never been any indication she was a threat to her friends and allies. In fact, until last weekend, I'd have judged her the perfect Autumn Courtier; obedient, reliable, and quite powerful. A real asset for Autumn and as a member of your motley, for you, despite her odd background."

Less digested this information for a few moments before his brain shifted gears. Ever since his meeting with the Ice Queen he had growing unease over Mira's burgeoning relationship with Drake of the Summer Court. He told himself it was in Drake's best interest if he interfered. It could not be healthy for him to get too close to a heart pierced through by one of Her icicles.

"Very thorough, indeed, Claire. Thank you. You can deliver an encrypted report at your leisure. With that out of the way, the Bleak Seal does have need of your services as Wretched Doorward. It seems Winter may have called upon Summer's warriors once too often recently. They are pressing for return favours I'd rather not give. Make the rounds of your Hedge contacts. Find out if there are any troubling Hedge-monsters out there. The farther away the better. We had the Brainbugs, maybe they're popping up in Las Vegas or something. If you don't hear of anything, I guess that's good news. I have other avenues to pursue."

Claire bowed. "As you wish, sire." Then she turned to leave the Winter King to his musings.

"Before you go," said Less quickly. "In your time with the witches, did you hear talk of anything known as an *uh-face do*?"

She turned back around and shook her head. "No. Thought it sounds a bit like some of the Celtic words I heard them use from time to time." She considered and then shook her head. "No, that was something that sounded like *she sa-do*, which they use to refer to this supposed big black book of magic or or something. That's not what you are saying, but it has a similar cadence, you know? Maybe it's the same language. Or it might be a total red herring."

"Thank you, that's a great help." He watched her go, making a mental note to do some research.

Tuesday Evening, March 6, 2012

Mira was curled up at the end of the couch in Less's sitting room. She had a hand bag on the floor at the foot of the couch, filled with just a couple changes of underclothes and a pair of rather formal-looking outfits she'd gathered from Rey's house.

"I'm sorry to impose on you like this," she signed to Less. "I don't know what Leopold might do, or if Xavier or one of his people might do. I hired a witch to ward it against most supernatural beings, but unfortunately I couldn't ward it from mortals. And mortals are the preferred servants and go-to people that vampires like Leopold and Xavier use."

She was scared and homeless in a way she'd never been before. The streets didn't feel safe for her right now, the park and pond she used to count on felt violated to her, invaded by werewolves. Her own home had been the target of multiple attacks recently, and she'd already spent over a week hiding out at the motley's Hollow. She needed to remain connected to the mortal world, but felt like the rug had been pulled out from under her again.

What she couldn't voice was something Less well knew. If she was to feel safe again she needed to either

find a way to feel safe in her own home again, or she needed to find a new one. It seemed hard to imagine she could ever really feel safe in her own apartment again, but to Less it was obvious, had been obvious for some time, that she could not emotionally withstand another massive change in her life again. She'd lose her mind and this time it could well be for good.

She hadn't wanted to impose on Rey. Rey's private time was spent with home and whenever she could that included Richard. She hadn't wanted to be in the way. But Less had always kept an open door for her and had come immediately to mind when she thought of places to go. So, after contacting Amber and telling her friend she needed to lay low for a while longer yet, she'd asked Less about staying with him immediately after the birthday party at Rey's house.

"It's really no trouble," said Less from the stove. "I'm hardly ever here these days. I'm either at the train station or at Winter's offices. I'll be glad when Spring finally comes." Less paused in his stirring of the goblin fruit stir-fry. The eyes in the back of his head stared at Mira's lounging form. It was becoming easier every day for him to see the Ice Queen in her features.

Mira looked over at him with a small smile. "No trouble? That doesn't sound like me."

Less suddenly remembered the cooking with a bit of a start. "This is true..." he said, nodding. "But it adds the spice of life! I wouldn't trade our motley for anything. It will be a pleasure to have you sleep with me. Uh, I mean, for you to sleep here. That is to say, *live* here. In any case, I'm sure it won't be long before we can find you a safe place of your own." He busied himself with various cooking pots to cover his embarrassment.

Mira thought she'd made him nervous. "The couch is fine for me. I wouldn't think of putting you out of your bed." She paused, "Or the floor is fine. And I enjoy tubs, if yours is large."

"I'm sorry," said Less turning to face her. "I'm just not used to having roommates, but I am looking forward to you staying here. My tub is just regular-sized but you are welcome to it but I wouldn't dream of you sleeping on the couch. Not until we can get a fold-away bed or something."

Supper was ready then and Less dished it out for them. He had to pull the small table away from the wall to make room for a second place.

"This must be quite a disruption for Amber as well," said Less once they had taken a few bites. "How is she coping with the changes?"

Mira took a moment to thank him for the meal. It wasn't something she took for granted even in the best of times. "Amber is coping probably better than me. She acts like she doesn't have a worry in the world and honestly, she probably doesn't. I guess I worry enough for both of us. Anyway, she managed to get Carson or Remy to provide her some crash space. They know she's important to me so I think she'll be okay with them."

Mira had left it unsaid, but the fact the vampires couldn't trust her enough to provide the same for her was obvious. With no way of knowing if Leopold had left some hidden command, they couldn't afford to allow her too close. For all they knew, she'd kill them while they slept. The vampires were very paranoid when it came to their security, particularly so when it involved rival vampires.

"So, the vampires come through again. I sometimes worry that our debt to them grows too deep. Rey must owe Remy a lot for their help against the werewolves. Has Amber really severed ties with her family so much that she can never go back?"

Mira took a bite and chewed while she put her thoughts in order. When she was ready, she put down her fork. "In truth, it's all on me," Mira signed. "Rey owes Remy nothing. They have all pledged to me, though putting themselves in serious danger is above and beyond any requirements of the pledge. In general, I gain

power when they show me the courtesy of at least a chaste kiss. In return I grant them small favors. For their help in the park, though, that's a bigger one. And I owe Minerva even more for helping me with my... memory problem.

"As for Amber, I'm not really sure. We have kind of an unspoken agreement. I don't ask her about her past and she doesn't ask about mine. She's been a runaway for a long time, though, and has never expressed any interest in discussing going back with me."

Less paused before venturing forward. "I have noticed you don't talk about your past, before you were Taken. I understand if you don't want to talk about it. Was it that bad?"

"I thought so at the time," she signed. "Bad enough to run away." She shrugged. "I don't talk about it much because it's just another typical teenage runaway story that's repeated in every big city everywhere I know of. Running away didn't help, either. It just made me an easy mark to be Taken. How about you? What were you like before you were Taken?"

"I was young," he sighed. "Well, I was older than you - eighteen - but I holding onto my childhood. I was a dreamer, some would say lazy. Mostly, I didn't want to fight in a war far from home." He shrugged and drank. "That was a long time ago and I can barely remember it." Which was true. When the Ice Queen left him, she took most of his memories with her. But here, now, sitting across the table from him, was his first hope that all would be made right. He smiled at her.

Mira returned his smile and then picked up a fork, stabbed a slice of purple goblin fruit and sampled it thoughtfully. "I met the new pack of werewolves the other night. After our fight at the pond in General Hyde Park."

Less leaned back in his chair, tipped his head back and covered his face with his hands. "More werewolves," he groaned. "What was I saying about you not being any trouble?" He returned his arms to the table and shook his head with a smile to let Mira know he wasn't really angry with her.

"Go on," he said with a sigh. "Let's hear it."

"We sort of bumped into each other," she signed. "I was walking by the place I used to sleep out there. There's a storm sewer that empties into the pond with a grate that's rusted out. I used to have a place just inside there where the tunnel had crumbled a bit, leaving a shallow cave. Then this naked girl and a man came walking out of there like it was normal to do that in 40 degree weather. They had two wolves with them, though, so I knew immediately they must be werewolves. Don't ask me why they were naked though. I didn't ask them. Mostly I was surprised and then annoyed they'd walked in on a place I'd thought was special to me and no one else.

"They seemed to think I was some kind of water spirit at first. I guess I wasn't dressed for the weather either, or they would have just thought I was some stray human. Anyway it was touch and go at first, but they didn't seem to be looking for a fight. They were downright friendly. And smart, too. I tried to tempt them with offers of power and wealth. You know, standard procedure to give people what they think they want at a price that benefits us more and also sends them on their way.

"But they were smarter than they looked, standing there shivering in freezing water and nearly getting hypothermia. They didn't want power or wealth or any of that. So I agreed to meet with them."

Less knitted his eyebrows and waited for her to continue.

"The next day, which would have been oh, a few days before Rey's birthday party, we met. More of them were in human form and we were all dressed more appropriately for the weather. I tested them to the best of my ability but they seem to genuinely just want to be good neighbors. They even promised to keep the park

clear of any of those vicious wolves. The Pure, I think they are called. I told them that if they did that then they could visit the pond when they wanted.

"It turns out there was a place of power that they wanted to visit at the pond. Right were I used to live! I don't know how that came to be. I haven't sensed anything like that there but, werewolves are different I guess. Maybe they just like dens. I don't know. They didn't ask to live there, just visit once in a while."

"Well," said Less, gathering his thoughts. "For someone who challenged Lyla and demanded that your pond be free of werewolves, you are dealing with their presence very well. I suppose these are the new pack that Chaska mentioned would move in. I think you handled it very well, very maturely, Mira. Lyla will likely mention it to Rey so I'll leave it to her to determine if they will be safe neighbours. Were there any other agreements made?"

"No, not yet," she signed. "Communication was a little difficult at first. The ones in wolf form seem especially sensitive to my Voice. And I think their initial attitude went a long way toward making me feel a bit more comfortable dealing with them compared to other wolves. For example, even though there were four of them and only one of me when we first met, they gave the definite impression of being afraid of me. I think someone must have told them I was not to be messed with." Mira smiled happily at the memory of the wolves shivering and naked standing in front of her looking at least as vulnerable as the nymph herself at felt at the time. "But you know what they did? Some of them have decided to go and learn ASL. Just so they can speak with me. Another one, who stayed in wolf form was even asking for scrubs and rolled over for me. I don't think I've ever met such friendly werewolves."

"Almost too good to be true," said Less and meant it. He was immediately suspicious and would make sure Rey carefully vetted them. "I guess our display of dominance in the park the other night carried some weight."

Mira nodded and added, "Don't worry though. I won't let them anywhere near the Door at the bottom of the pond, if even they think to poke around down there." She looked thoughtful. "I could put an elemental into play down there. Like Rhonwyn, only have it drown anything that messes with the stones, then warn the werewolves not to stray far from shore if they do enter the pond."

"You can never be too careful," agreed Less.

"I'll start looking into it, then," Mira signed.

She finished her plate, saying that she usually just ate goblin fruit raw, but that she liked the way he prepared it. Then she took her dinnerware to the kitchen to clean it, giving Less a view of her backside. She wore borrowed jeans that fit her and showed off a rump any woman would be proud of, and a pink, loose-fitting deep V-neck knit top. Her bare feet padded quietly across his floor.

While he could appreciate the symmetry of the view, it could not stir anything in the heartless void inside him. He moved to collect his own plate when he was suddenly struck by a vision of memory.

Jadis approached her vanity mirror and shrugged on a thin robe. It was made of a loose knit of pale pink fibres, trimmed with white ermine. He could see her pale back and buttocks through the garment. She poured some water into a slender wine glass from a crystal ewer. Ice tinkled against the glass. She took a drink and her reflection smiled at him. The fingers of her other hand were coated in blood. As she drew a heart on the glass, crimson drops fell into a bowl of jewelry on the desk.

Less' plate clattered the couple of inches to the table. "Ice!" he blurted as he struggled to remember where he was. His body was flushed with arousal, only now beginning to cool. Mira looked at him questioningly. "Ice cream," he managed. "There's ice cream for dessert."

Noting his color Mira looked concerned, glanced at the freezer, then seemed uncertain as if she was unsure she'd heard an outburst or imagined it. She looked back at Less. "Are you okay?" she asked aloud.

"Oh yeah, I'm fine. I just - I just remembered some Winter Court business that I had forgotten to do." He handed her his plate and as she turned back to the sink he couldn't help but inhale her scent. He went to the freezer and took a long time retrieving the ice cream to let the cool air wash over his face and hands. "Speaking of the Courts, are you much involved with Autumn these days? I haven't spoken with Veridia in a while."

"I guess that depends on what you mean by involved," Mira signed. "I was never the most social of them. Always kind of an outsider and lost in society. I haven't made amends with Veridia yet, either, and I know that vexes Rey. I guess I'm hiding from that stuff too, but just until I figure out what I want to be to the Court."

"I'm sure there's no hurry, but it's probably best if you're straight with Veridia. You wouldn't want to be walking around with her holding a grudge. I don't want to interfere or anything, but there's always room at Winter."

Mira thought about that carefully for a minute. Finally, she shook her head. "I appreciate the suggestion, but the primary emotions of winter don't resonate with me. You're right, I know. I need to deal with Veridia somehow. I know I want to be a sorceress as far as the Duchy is concerned. I like investigating artifacts and places of magic and figuring out how it all works. I just haven't figured out what I want to be to Autumn, specifically. Until I know I'll be an outcast, and I can only imagine the kinds of rumors about that might fly around, but I don't want to make a hasty decision. I'm going to have to live with it for a long time."

"Certainly you should wait until you know what you want. There's plenty of time for that decision but the conversation with Veridia should happen sooner rather than later." Less began scooping generous portions of ice cream into bowls. It put him in close proximity to her and it gave him a thrill when he deliberately brushed her shoulder with his. "That reminds me. I overheard Marie talking witchy stuff at the party the other night. Do you know what an *uh-face do* is? Sounded like it was Celtic in origin or something."

She didn't seem to mind how close he was. "You mean like Irish, Scottish or Welsh?" Mira wondered. "I don't know any of those languages, sorry. I've never heard of that. If you know the spelling, though, you could probably just do one of those Google searches. If you don't know, then... well I'm not sure. You might have to find a fluent speaker to discover the meaning. Maybe Marie would tell you if she was talking about it?"

"Yes, I'll probably ask her if I think of it again. I was just embarrassed about not being able to follow the conversation." He served up the ice cream and they returned to the small table. "I'm excited about you doing the ice sculptures for the party," he said after savouring the creamy treat. "Do you actually carve the ice, or do you mold it with Glamour?"

"Both, really," Mira admitted. "I used magic to get the water I needed into ice form. I don't have the money to buy a block of ice. My control over it isn't fine, so I used other means to shave and cut it. Lyla and Chaska let me work on it right were you saw it because I also had no way to move it without altering its form."

"Do you have all the tools you need? I can arrange for more if you need them. It's convenient we're meeting with Spring about the party this week. While we're there we can meet the new prospect for the Glymjacks."

"It might make some things a lot easier," Mira agreed. She gave him a list of knives and scrapers she thought would be helpful. "And the implied invitation is appreciated," she signed with a pleased expression. "What is this person's name?" She wondered if it might be someone she'd met before.

"He calls himself Doctor Tom. He's pretty handy in first aid and medicines."

"No, don't know him," Mira admitted.

She finished her dessert and then stifled a yawn. She blinked her eyes wide, then signed, "Sorry about that! I'm really tired. I think I'll skip the bath tonight if I can use your shower instead?"

"Be my guest! I shower in the morning anyway. Towels are on the top shelf."

Mira beamed a smile at him. Before she turned toward the bathroom, she signed, "I'm not sure we settled where I should sleep tonight, but I'll be happy with whatever you decide." She then disappeared into the bathroom.

Less busied himself with putting his spare sheets on his bed and making up the couch for himself. He was certainly feeling out of sorts. His elemental cool was gone, replaced by a roiling storm cloud. *The Ice Queen must be up to something*, he thought. His hand touched the snuff box that contained her gift.

Later that night, Less slept fitfully. When he did sleep, dreams plagued him until he wasn't sure if he was awake or asleep. Sometime near dawn there came a dream he could not get out of his head. This one featured the Ice Queen.

It seemed like he had been running or searching or both. As he looked, behind him the mortal world warped and cracked open, allowing things that looked like writhing roots and streams of fire to burst free. He could see before him the hovering face of his queen and she kept telling him something. For most of the dream, he couldn't make it out, but at the end, just before he woke up, she'd told him he was wise to keep the girl near, that only she could sense its presence. The dream ended with the Queen demanding he find this... whatever it was so loudly he became instantly awake and half believing that the words had been spoken aloud in his very apartment.

But he remembered something. The Ice Queen hadn't said "uh-face do" precisely. The breathy sound wasn't an "f" sound, but something soft and formed further back in the mouth. It was a clue, in a sense. At least now, he felt better about the pronunciation.

Less heard movement and looked around. Light had broken in through the window and Mira was sitting quietly on a chair she must have moved to it. Her face was away from him as she looked out at something on the streets below.

He squinted at the light with dismay. After not sleeping the whole night, he had clearly slept in. His head buzzed with his Keeper's words and his mouths were dry. "What time is it?" he asked Mira.

She started a little and turned to look at him. "Good morning," she signed. "The clock above the stove said eight fifteen when I passed it a while ago."

A glance told less it was now actually nine.

"Are you okay?" she said aloud to get his attention. "You're all looking every direction."

"I'm late!" he said. He wanted to leap up but he was only wearing his underwear. "What happened to my alarm clock?"

Mira's eyebrows rose and she shook her head. But Less's myriad eyes were still looking around and a pair of them caught sight of it. It'd somehow fallen off the lamp stand and onto the floor. It was likely it had switched itself off or was broken, a casualty of his restless sleep.

Less sighed and sat upright on the couch with the bed sheets still covering his lower body. He rubbed his face and looked at Mira directly for the first time. "Sorry, I didn't sleep that well." He glanced to the window. "What's the weather like?"

"I think Spring is coming. It's raining." She smiled. "Since you are running late, I'll cook you breakfast while you get ready."

"That's very kind, thank you," he said. "Tea and toast will be fine." He waited for her to turn to the kitchen before he grabbed his clothes and headed to the bathroom. He didn't bother with a shower, but splashed hot water on his face and shaved quickly.

After dressing in the clothes from the day before, he entered the kitchen to obtain breakfast.

The toast was ready and Mira had even found some butter and jelly for it if he wanted. The tea wasn't steeped as expertly or as long as he usually did it, but it was fresh. He gulped it down, grabbed his umbrella, and headed out. "Mira, you're a peach!" he called as he jogged down the corridor.

The Newcomer
Friday, March 9, 2012

The meeting with Less, Squire Lyre and some of the party-prep folks from Spring went according to plan in the otherworldly Duchy Hollow of Iron Mountain. Even the Spring Queen attended, though she had to leave early due to mundane obligations she said had come up. Less chaired the meeting but Squire Lyre was in charge of the planning. The theme was to be "The Quickening of the Land." The decorations were to be enchanted such that they would turn from dormant winter buds to blooming springtime flowers over the course of the evening. The ice sculptures were to be of Winter and Sorrow themes, but as they melted they would reveal Spring sculptures inside. Dress would begin formal but would relax to more casual attire in regular stages - the details of which would be arranged by Spring. Squire Lyre and his Spring counterpart were handling all the catering, decorating, invitations, and other organization. Less and Ishtar were left to secure the required Glamour and enchantments.

Later Less, Mira, and Rey were scheduled to meet another Spring Courtier that went by Doctor Tom. It was easy to compare the bent, wizened little changeling with a favorite grandfather. He was elderly, wrinkled, but spry and witty and his dark eyes glittered with delight at the thought of a challenge. He wore a stained lab coat with a stethoscope hung around his neck and heavy, black boots. He was seated on a bench in Spring's Garden, an area for which they had permission to meet Doctor Tom.

"Good evening, Doctor Tom," Rey said, smiling at him.

"We are the Glymjack Motley," supplied Less. He took a small notebook from his pocket. It held his notes on Doctor Tom and the questions he wanted to ask him.

"I like him," Mira signed to her fellows. "He's shorter than me. Also, I seem to recall seeing him around Autumn." She also dipped slightly in greeting to the good doctor.

The last candidate had been an ogre so huge, he likely weighed as much as the the whole motley put together. And much of that was girth. Mira had also complained of the smell and she'd had a point. That gristle grinder ogre smelled of his last meal, which surely must have been raw meat left in the sun too long.

"Pleased to meet you all!" Doctor Tom said energetically. He seized Less's hand and gave him a good pumping. Despite his energy, his grip was soft.

At least Doctor Tom's greeting seemed sincere and friendly, Rey thought. Thestral, a Courtless Darkling they'd met with before the gristlegrinder, was practically the opposite. She was cool and arrogant, and it had quickly become clear to Rey that Thestral was far more interested in the prestige of being part of their motley than the opportunity for the companionship and support.

"We'd like to get to know you a little, and ask you a few questions if you don't mind?" said Less casually. "Have you been in Mythic long? What other Motleys have you been a member of?"

The doctor's head bobbed affirmatively. "I've been in Mythic for almost five years and Santa Fe for ten years before that," he said. "Never did join a motley. When I first came to Santa Fe I was just too busy doctoring and trying to get myself set up. I was pretty happy doing freelance work in those days. Eventually I moved to Mythic because I found more and more clients from the bigger city. It was more convenient for them to reach me. Finally, a couple years ago I joined Spring. It seemed like a good fit for me and the time was right, what with the arrival of the first Spring Queen to enter the area in recent memory.

"But now I think I'd like to have more time for research. So, I'm going to leave 'general practice' and go into private practice. What I'd like is to be a part of a motley and close up my general services. My expectation is that I'd provide all the medical services a motley needs and in exchange I could spend most of my time in a nice lab. I heard your motley has a generous amount of space available to motley members and I could really use that. If you let me, of course."

"Do you know Alexei Kosygin?" Rey watches Doctor Tom's face as she waits for an answer. She'd been considering heading to Corazon for a couple of drinks and a short visit with her friend when the motley was done with their interviews. Perhaps Alexei could tell her what he knew about Doctor Tom.

Doctor Tom nodded. "Yes indeed. I used to do some work for him. His club was sometimes more... interesting than it is these days. I rendered services many times."

So far the answers Less was receiving was matching up with the information he'd managed to dig up on his own. "I don't mean to pry into personal subjects, but what do you know of the existence of your fetch?" He was going to ask about Dr. Tom's Keeper but changed his mind at the last minute, deciding that was going too far at this time.

"Ah, my fetch. Well, that one is deceased, courtesy of a client who took care of the issue in return for medical care of an invasive, and private, nature," Doctor Tom indicate.

Rey looked over at Mira. "Do you have anything you'd like to ask him?" she signed.

Mira nodded and said, "*Do you know anything about Arcadian physiology?*"

Doctor Tom looked a little surprised. Mira didn't look like the type to know what that meant. "Arcadian you say? You mean creatures with distinctly non-human physiology far removed from human baseline physiology such as those of true Fae descent and some of the more complex beings of Arcadia and the Hedge?"

She nodded.

"Indeed yes. The techniques are different and based more on the principles of magic than science. But such knowledge is of limited use since most such beings of Faerie rely on physiology that is impossible to the mortal line of thinking, and is unique to each case." He considered. "Do you have a specific concern?"

Mira said, "*We have a spright that works for us in our Hollow. I'd like to think you could help her if she gets sick or injured. Also, I believe my physiology is more Arcadian than human.*"

"Why is that?"

"I can heal injuries just by eating anything harvested from the Hedge. But I also am dependent upon it. I can't survive long on a purely mortal diet."

Doctor Tom rubbed the bristly whiskers of his lower jaw. "That is rather unusual. Why might this be, I wonder. You appear to be a changeling."

"I'm definitely a changeling," Mira said with certainty. *"I don't know why my body does what it does. It just always has."*

"Ah. Well. Every changeling is different in some way," Doctor Tom. "Perhaps when your Keeper did whatever he did to your voice, he had to change something in your body, eliminate something... human. I'd love a chance to examine you in detail."

Mira only raised her eyebrow at him.

Rey chuckled.

"I'm sure examinations would be in order for all of us," said Less. "Do you have any enemies that we should be aware of?" asked Less as he wrote something in his notebook.

"I don't think so," answered the doctor.

"Do you have experience treating vampire and werewolf inflicted wounds?" Rey asked

"Vampire and werewolf *inflicted?* As in from an attack?" He frowned. "Well no. I have treated wounds from other supernatural creatures of the Hedge of course. But not that which you describe."

"What about the stains on your coat?" Rey flicks a finger at them. "What are they from, and what kind of research do you conduct?"

"Medical research," he stated firmly. "The stains? They always seem to just show up whenever I wear a lab coat, or any clothing for that matter, for more than a few minutes." He shrugged.

Less read the next question on his list. "What would you consider your greatest accomplishment? And similarly, your greatest failure?"

"Good question," Doctor Tom said. He pursed his lips. "I would guess that both happened during my Durance, but these things are half-remembered and it's hard to tell if they really happened or not. Since then I suppose there have been many accomplishments as you say, but I consider myself having two roles; that of scientist and that of doctor. In either case I'm not sure what I'd choose to be my greatest achievements or failures. Which exactly would you prefer to hear about?"

It was his medicine that they were mainly here to hear about but Less considered that Rey had wanted to hear about his research. "Scientist," he said.

"I was able to demonstrate the application of scientific principles to the construction of a near-to-life automaton to my peers," he grinned. "As you must know, that's quite a feat since magic, by its very nature is unscientific."

"You and Rover would have some very interesting conversations," Rey said with a chuckle.

Less was basically satisfied with Dr. Tom's answers. "I assume you would be agreeable to the Motley

Pledge?"

"Ah! Yes indeed," he agreed, "assuming it's the standard alliance stuff."

Less nodded to the Motley's pledge-crafters to answer.

"It's a slight variation," Rey replied and briefly mentioned their customizations.

Doctor Tom nods enthusiastically. "Quite fair," he agrees.

Mira looks at the others. *"I'd be happy extending the pledge right now, if you guys are."*

Less looked about the Garden. They seemed to be unobserved but that could rarely be assured amongst changelings. It didn't much matter but Less wanted news of the new Glymjack to be slow starting. It was mainly for Dr. Tom's benefit - he could probably use a bit of time to prepare before being hounded by the dark cloud of trouble that seemed to follow them around - but Less had some investigations within the Spring Court that would benefit from the position in their motley being still unfilled. "Very well," he said, and gestured for Dr. Tom to stand with them.

The wizened doctor did so and in short order, he joined the rest of the motley in their pledge.

But while Tom excitedly talked about making preparations to move his lab and medical supplies to the Hollow (and the list of contributions he planned to make to said Hollow), another wizened changeling approached the group.

"Excuse me," said Peaches, the inventor scion of the Spring Court said to Mira.

The nymph, still smiling at Doctor Tom's excitement, looked a question at the little inventor.

"I have a message for you from your Queen Veridia." She pressed a paper into Mira's hands and backed away. "Ah. Ah, I'm so sorry for interrupting your meeting. I was told the message was important." She bowed repeatedly toward the Winter King as she left the motley to their privacy once more.

Mira frowned.

"What is it?" Rey asked.

"I guess Veridia wants to meet with me while I'm here." She looked at her friends gravely. "I knew I wasn't going to be able to avoid this forever. I better go talk to her." She didn't seem in any hurry to go, however.

Doctor Tom looked puzzled at the exchange but didn't interrupt.

"I could go with you, if you like," Rey immediately offered.

Less nodded encouragingly to Mira, letting her know he was with her in spirit.

"It's okay," Mira signed in Glymjack and Doctor Tom was surprised to understand. "This is something I've been needing to do for some time." She gave them a smile that seemed much more confident than she felt, then turned to go.

When she returned ten minutes later, she wasn't smiling at all. She found a bench and plopped down heavily.

"What's wrong?" Rey sat down next to her friend.

"Me," Mira responded. "I tried to be nice to her, but I just don't want to work for her. I told that as gently as I could, but she came back at me saying that I would never have turned against her like this if I hadn't gotten involved with vampires. She blamed my attitude on what happened to me and that I wasn't myself and never would be unless I let her help me.

"Yeah right. I know what her version of help is, and I'm not going to be *anybody's* little slave ever again. I'm *not* going to let her mess with my head any more. So I told her that my friends have given me all the help I need and she actually had the nerve to say she knew better! She said she knew what was good for me better than I did or anyone else I called friend.

"That made me mad. I probably shouldn't have told her to go fuck herself. She took that personally and now seeks to teach me a lesson or some such. We have a duel in the Arena in one hour."

"A duel?" Rey couldn't help but stare. "But, what happens to the winner - or the loser?"

Mira looked at her. *"If she wins she gets to punish me and the whole Duchy will know of it. If I win, she lays off and can't touch me anymore and the whole Duchy will know it."*

A moment later, every changeling in the Duchy felt the news as it swept through all changelings connected to the Duchy and therefore the Duchy's Hollow. After more than five years of not being used, the Arena beckoned, sending a single, simple message whispering through the minds of freeholders: *"Changelings assemble! Mira Naia and Queen Veridia will duel in the Arena!"*

Less frowned. A duel was not called for in this circumstance. Veridia, as Queen of the Autumn Court, had the most to lose from such a public battle. He wished she had talked to him first about this. Now, there was nothing he could do. "I'm sorry Mira," he said to her. "I never expected Veridia would go this far."

"I'm not," Rey replied. "I'll be there for you. We all should be." The Fairest reached into her pocket and withdrew a necklace with a Glymjack symbol on it and offered it to Doctor Tom. "This is yours. You're a Glymjack now."

Tom took the symbol and put it on. He had a grave expression on his face. "It seems my services may be in need sooner rather than later," he remarked.

Mira grapes Rey's arm to show her appreciation of the vote of confidence. Then she looked to Less. *"I'm sure it is my fault, Less. Rumors of my continued defiance has traveled throughout my court, I'm sure, and now Veridia is faced with either allowing everyone to think there is no consequence for it or doing something about it. I should never have spoken to her the way I did, regardless of my own feelings, when I called her and told her I resigned as Legate. But I did and now I must either stand up for myself and defend my freedom. I see no one else volunteering to be my champion..."*

The Duel

Mira arrived near the Arena. Soon enough it would be time to enter it and to battle her one-time mentor and current Queen. She couldn't help but wonder if Veridia would fight her personally, or if she might send in the Paladin of Shadows. Mira would take no pleasure in fighting Richard over this. She sighed and slumped down onto a bench made of living wood.

The walk to the Arena was a hard one for Less. It was true that Mira had brought this upon herself, and Less

felt that her combat abilities would match Veridia's quite handedly. However, what Veridia was doing was out of line and threatened not only his motley mate but a woman who he'd sworn to himself to protect with his life. The Ice Queen's snowflake once again felt heavy in his pocket. He stood in front of Mira and took a breath of courage. "I will be your champion," he announced. Before the others could protest, he carried on. "Veridia cannot back down now that she has announced the duel. The only way a stop can be put to this is if I, as Winter King, stands up to her. Maybe I can win with convincing arguments."

"You would do that for me?" Mira looked astonished. After some thought, Mira signed, "I'm not sure if you can negotiate with her at this point. The conditions of the duel have been set and she and I are both bound by them."

"He might be able to," Rey said. "A duel doesn't always have to be fought with weapons or magic. It could be fought with words. He could negotiate something that could meet the conditions of the duel. Unless, of course, the winning condition is the death of one of the duelists, which I doubt it is. This means, Mira, you have to put your complete trust in Less. And Less, you have to go in there with every intent of resolving this in the best possible manner, one that will be the best possible outcome for Mira. And be prepared to fight Veridia should she be unwilling to negotiate." She looks between the two of them. "Do you think the two of you can do this?"

"Absolutely," said Less. "If Veridia called the duel, don't I get to pick the weapons?"

"Not if the weapons for the duel have already been decided upon as part of the conditions of the duel," Rey replied.

"The conditions are that we take no weapon with us into the Arena. We can fight with mind, magic or body," Mira signed. "I would guess that talking things out falls under mind. But Less, I think this is too big of a risk for you to take for me. What if she won't listen? I don't want you to get hurt. If I get hurt, well... honestly it's par for the course. And I have no one to blame but myself. But if you get hurt then that's my fault."

"I'm sure about this," replied Less. "Veridia would have Hell to pay from the Duchy if she seriously injured the Winter King. This is a duel for reputation and without the object of her ire facing her, her sails will deflate." He turned to Dr. Tom hopefully. "Is there anything you can do for my body now before I enter the Arena?"

"Before you are injured? Hm," Tom considered. "Well I could do a little something that would transfer any wounds you might take to me, but I'm uncertain if it will work, given the nature of duels."

"*Wait. Less? If you will be talking to her on my behalf...*" Mira stopped and stared at Less. Whatever he worked out with Veridia, she was the one who'd have to live with it. But he could be risking his life for her, whether he believed it would come to that or not, so didn't that mean she should give him the courtesy of trusting him? Besides, she thought to herself, it wasn't as if people were lining up to fight for her. "*Okay. I trust you, Less. You know how I feel.*"

"One last thing," Rey said. "Are you willing to deal with the potential political fallout of this? Veridia might take offense at Winter getting involved"

"Winter is the underdog in Mythic, and the champion of underdogs," said Less with a shrug. "I think King must face Queen here and people will understand that. Winter will survive this."

"Yeah, but what about the rest of us in the motley?" Rey made a little gesture with her hand. "Veridia is my Queen. What if she takes your championing Mira personally? She could cause a lot of trouble for us. For example, if V were to withdraw her support of Winter, and she called upon all those loyal to her to do the same, do you see the position Mira and I would be in?"

Mira looked between them, unable to decide. She was flattered that Less offered to do this, but yet she agreed with Rey that the risks were great. *"Less? You have been so good to me. Letting me stay at your place, sticking up for me and helping me fight my battles... I realize that the motley pledge means we all need to do this for each other, but I've called on you more than my fair share of time, and I really have never reciprocated as I should have. You don't have to do this. You don't have to put Winter at risk. It's my fight."*

"I'm not trying to talk him out of it," Rey replied instantly. "I just wanted to make sure he knew the risks. That it wasn't just his neck on the line." She looked at Mira. "She's angry. Really angry. She's going to want to make an example of you. I don't want that to happen. I'll go into the Arena for you before I let her hurt you."

"As would I." Drake closed the distance between himself and the motley.

Drake's presence irritated Less. He considered this motley business and the flashy Summer warrior was an interloper. He couldn't deny him his chivalry, but it was misplaced - and too late. There could be only one champion, and Less wasn't about to give up his place for Drake. "Look," said Less calmly. "The reason I'm going into the Arena is to try to *avoid* a fight." He caught Mira's attention away from Drake. "We should discuss our negotiations. I understand your unwillingness to submit yourself to Veridia but you also admit that you have behaved badly towards her. If I am able to get Veridia to leave you alone, what sanction would you agree to as a compromise?"

Mira had been startled at Drake's sudden and unexpected arrival, and his statement that he'd take her place in the Arena as well tugged at her heart. There were two men who'd fight for her!

But did that mean Drake had decided he liked her? Was he trying to simply be chivalrous? Or was it both.

Less had asked her a question though, so she'd have to try to figure that out later. It was a complicated question, too, since what she told him she would agree to could directly impact whether there would be a fight or not. She did *not* want to see Less hurt in her place. Or anyone for that matter. That means her offer had to be reasonable, something she thought Veridia would go for, or else there would be someone's blood on the Arena floor.

"My aim is to force Veridia to leave me alone. I am tired of being manipulated by people. I know she thinks she has been good to me, but it has always been for selfish reasons! I refuse to be her puppet and I would rather die than be her Voice anymore. This is what I'm fighting her for. But I wish I didn't have to."

"If I had another option, I would sacrifice almost anything of myself to not have to fight her directly or through a champion," she added with a nod toward the Summer Courtier. *"But I would not willingly agree to anything that might demean this motley or any of my friends, nor would I willingly agree to anything that meant anyone but me would suffer. But then, if I lose the duel I don't get to dictate terms, do I."* Mira sighed. *"If your attempt to discuss this with her works, and her demands will not require a sacrifice I already told you I would not accept, then you can offer her my surrender without a fight and I would not be upset with you. Of course, as my champion, you get to decide when and if you surrender, not me."* Which was exactly why it required so much trust.

"What selfish reasons," Rey asked. "Veridia cares for you as if you're her daughter."

"Veridia never wanted me to act as a Legate," Mira signed in ASL. "She only wanted me to be her voice, a puppet. She would send whispers to my ears and told me exactly what to say and do so that she didn't have to expose herself to her enemies. She never trusted me to act in the interests of the Autumn Court toward the other Great Courts or toward other supernatural groups. She even threatened my life when I refused to turn my back on my friends for her. It was that threat which broke the pledge that made me her Legate. If that's how she would treat her daughter, then count me out."

Less nodded. "I will attempt to convince Veridia to allow you to make amends to her privately in return for dropping her claim on you. Hopefully, having the mediation done in front of the entire Duchy will allow Veridia to feel her point has been made."

Mira put her hand gently on Less's arm. "*Good luck, King Seleman.*"

With Mira's champion selected, whispers went around the gathering audience like a winter breeze. People made way and Less passed through the hedge wall that bordered the Arena floor to await his adversary.

In the stands, Mira settled down with Rey on one side, Drake on the other, and Doctor Tom close at hand. With the Winter King standing in the Arena and the time for the duel nearly there, the changelings that had gathered in the past hour settled down. Even Ishtar and Jeremiah were in attendance.

Seating was arranged in quadrants. The Spring Court occupied what might be called the southern portion of the stadium, Winter was clockwise to the left, Autumn occupied the northern portion and Summer attended the eastern stadium. However, mixing of courts was common where motley's made of members of different courts preferred to sit together.

Veridia entered, accompanied by Lydia and Vicissitude, but the Paladin of Shadows, Richard, was nowhere in sight. The Ashen Queen did not appear girded for battle. She wore a flowing black gown of lace and silver. Her hair was up and her makeup showed off her ruby lips. The very pale woman was a majestic vision even so long from her time of the year. She was a Darkling in all her glorious and dark beauty.

Next her was the other Darkling of her motley, Vicissitude. Unlike her queen, Sissy was dressed in a practical black jumpsuit. Lydia took a seat near Doctor Tom looking calm but interested. When Sissy to head onto the Arena floor, Queen Veridia held her back and sat her down next to Lydia. With her eyes fixed upon King Seleman, Veridia stepped down from the stands and was admitted by the Hedge wall. She glided across the broken ground of the Arena to stand before Mira's Champion.

"How are you holding up?" Drake said softly to Mira. His hand brushed the side of hers like a butterfly landing on her.

A little thrill shivered up her spine and she couldn't help a smile. There was a part of her that was a very lonely girl that relished contact of any sort with another human being. Or somewhat human, as the case may be. Then again, there was also the predatory siren hidden beneath the surface of her deep, brown eyes.

"*I have no idea,*" she reported solemnly. "*If you ask me tomorrow I could tell you.*"

He put a finger on her chin and turned her head so that she was looking at him. "Then how are you feeling right now?" he signed.

Mira's smile faded as she thought about the things that had been worrying her. "*I'm scared I just sent Less into the lion's den. I'm worried I should have never accepted any champion and that I might have just screwed up Winter for not good reason. I'm angry at Veridia. I'm scared to go home, afraid monsters will come for me or my friends at any time so I've spent the last week hiding out, and I was sure you didn't want to see me again, but now you're here.*" Mira sighed. "*So now I'm happy Less wanted to stick up for me -- he seems to always have my back, you know? -- and happy that you are here, but I have all these other feelings swirling around like a whirlpool in my mind.*"

She stopped and met his eyes. "How are you?"

"Veridia," said Less formally. He bowed his head slightly in greeting for his equal opposite number. Hoar frost rose in his shadow as the Hedge reacted to his Winter Mantle. "I champion Mira's cause in this matter. It would not be fair to ask her to face the Queen of the Autumn Court in the Arena. I wish to negotiate with you so that blood need not be spilled between our Courts."

"This is a duel, King Seleman," Veridia pointed out, "not a negotiation. It must end in someone's surrender." She drifted closer and stopped an arm's length away so that when they spoke, they needn't raise their voice. "I'm surprised, Less. Was this your idea or hers?"

"It was my idea, of course. This doesn't need to be a duel. It sounds like you need a mediator. You are disappointed with Mira and she is angry with you. Reparations are due to both of you but the Arena is not the place to decide the outcome."

"Mira's defiance erodes my authority as Queen of Autumn. The Court of Fear does not rule our own with sunshine and happiness, my friend. Quitting her position as Legate is one thing. I concede that she has done well in finding a technicality that allows her a way out. I am even impressed. However, she *will* speak to me respectfully. I am her Queen. I am the Ashen Court. The matter is about respect at this point, King Seleman. If I allow her to continue to do this, then how can I command respect from the rest of my court? No. She has insulted me and that is why I felt forced to call this duel. My ability to rule is put into question. She must surrender to me and accept the consequences for her actions, or she must fight for her right to defy me. If she can do so successfully, then I cannot rule effectively. Autumn will have a new Queen."

Drake leaned forward and whispered into her head "There are many ears listening to our conversations. Do you really want them to hear?"

Mira squeezed her eyes together in a pained expression and her cheeks colored in embarrassment. She signed using ASL. "Sorry. I really am an idiot."

"A lot has been happening," Drake signed. "I wasn't sure you wanted to talk to me. I've called you a couple of times, but you never got back to me."

"I'm sorry about that," Mira returned. "I've been around, staying with Less. I got my apartment warded, but vampires use human minions too. Maybe I'm paranoid, but I just wanted to stay away in case they were looking for me. Let things cool down. I'll go back, but in the mean time I don't have a phone. And yes I do want to talk to you."

"I'm glad to hear that." Drake's fingers moved gracefully as he formed the words. "And I hope that things calm down enough soon so that you don't have to be hiding away anymore." His fingers stopped moving for a moment, then he continued. "I've missed you."

Mira's breath caught as hope dared to peek out from her eyes. She'd thought she might have totally humiliated herself by reacting to him the way she had in the car and scared him off. "Really? But I thought..." Her hands stopped.

"Thought what?" A gentle, slightly bemused smile curved his lips as he signed. "I told you I needed some time to think about things. I did. I thought you had decided not to wait for me." He glanced into the ring at the Winter King and then back at Mira. "Or have you moved on?"

Veridia made a very good point. He took her logic to be a good sign. With Mira she could only be emotional but with him they could find agreement. "I cannot deny that Mira has acted badly towards you. Mira's dispute with you is that you will not let her step down as Legate. She feels you were disrespectful to her which provoked her. How can a dispute over respect be solved by a fight between champions?" He made a small gesture towards Vicissitude. "Allow Mira to freely step down as an officer of your Court and be respectful of the person she has become. In return, she will accept a sanction for disrespecting yourself and the Autumn Crown."

Veridia considered, then offered, "We may yet find common ground. In exchange for her surrender without a fight, I will be lenient. I will allow her to step down as Legate. I will even release any debts she has to me with regard to the Contracts of power I helped her gain. But she must do two things for me. First she must make a public apology with at least some semblance of humility. Second, since she has clearly no understanding of what it means to serve a Court, I will help her learn. She will serve the Autumn Court at every function the I attend in a manner I find appropriate in order to learn humility and the value of what Mira was been given but threw away. By this I mean Mira will waitress formal events for her Court, except for those events which has no need of that service."

Her insinuation was that she didn't want to fight Less, but if she had to, then she would likely choose a harsher punishment for Mira, should she be the victor. She favored Less's concept of a solution without a fight, but she was still determined that she be seen as the victor over Mira in front of the Duchy.

"A public apology is in order," said Less, giving one nod of his head. "But it is impossible to agree to the second term. It is demeaning and has no duration. Better to exile her from Court for a season."

"You are right. The duration should be set to no more than one year. I contest your assertion that it is demeaning however. She serves mortals in a brew-house. And in the past she has performed the duties of pimp to a brood of hookers. If anything, being allowed to serve drinks for Autumn at formal events is a step *up* for her." Veridia sighed. "Less, I'm not trying to shame her. I'm trying to give her an opportunity to learn about court because otherwise, she'll exile *herself*. Yes, I'm making it look like a severe punishment to save my own face. But think of the benefits this so-called punishment could have for her."

"She has grown into a different person from those days," he began. Less hesitated, thinking through the offer. "Very well. Can I convince you to allow her position to be Hostess or Concierge? She would be at the service of the Court without being at their beck and call. It would give her agency and allow her to use her initiative to unlock these benefits you speak of. As a mere waitress she could only serve out her sentence of drudgery."

"Let her earn a title, otherwise I have little motivation to improve her situation. If her apology to me is performed in earnest so that all know it is a mistake to insult me then I will grant it." Her eyes narrowed. "But if instead she embarrasses me in front of my court again, she will not like what the coming year holds for her. Do you agree?"

Less felt this was as best he could do for Mira. It would work out well for him, as Constable of the Bleak Seal, as she would be well-placed to hear private conversations amongst the August Court members. "Yes. I agree."

Veridia stepped back and looked at the surrounding audience. She raised her voice so all could hear. "Mira Naia surrenders and I accept."

Disappointed whispers shivered through the crowd while the two leaders left the Arena. Sissy shouted word

for Autumn to gather and Less knew that Veridia would head to the large audience chambers above to hear Mira's apology. All that was left was to inform Mira what was expected.

"You mean, am I dating someone else?" Mira shook her head. "No. Too busy being a coward lately."

"Are you sure? The Winter King didn't seem too thrilled when I made my offer."

Mira blinked and then looked out at the King and Queen debating in the center of the Arena. "But he hasn't said anything. He's always been the one I went to for advice. A good friend. Maybe he is just being protective. Like volunteering to be my champion."

"Elementals aren't always good at showing their emotions," Drake signed, "or even recognizing them at times. And trust me, I know jealousy and irritation when I see it."

She'd had to look back to Drake to watch his signing, but she looked back out at Less, who was valiantly trying to save her hide. She knew it was true when Drake said it. Finally she turned to him and signed, "I understand what you are saying. But are you sure of the reasons he felt that way when you showed up? That there might not be some other reason he reacted that way?"

"He wasn't happy I showed up," Drake signed. "I have no doubt of that. He was annoyed with my being there. He resented it, and he wasn't about to let me take on the role of your champion. It's not a good idea for the Regents to fight duels. If he was thinking as a King, he'd have stepped aside and let someone step into the arena for you. That means it's personal."

Mira didn't know what to say about that. "I seem to always be playing catch-up to these things," she admitted. "But to answer your question, I hadn't moved on to anyone or anything. Just hiding. I guess that time is over now, though. I'll have to go home to my apartment."

"I'll go with you, if you like," Drake offered.

"Thanks, but I meant go home to my apartment permanently," Mira signed.

"And I meant exactly what I said," Drake signed back. "I'll go with you to your apartment, escort you there. Or did you mean you plan to go there and never leave it again?"

Mira smiled but shook her head. "That would pose problems. And yes, thank you. An escort might be nice. I'll have to contact Amber and let her know, as well. She'll want to come home again. I think."

"I'm sure she will." Drake gave Mira a reassuring smile.

Rey touched Mira lightly on her shoulder to get her attention. When she did, the Fairest signed in Glymjack sign "You mentioned a pledge with Veridia about being the Legate. Can you tell me about it?"

Mira pardoned herself from her discussion with Drake, then turned to Rey. "I'm not sure. Why do you want to know?"

"I'm just curious about it, from a pledgesmithing point of view," Rey signed back. "The wording, and so on."

"Well, it wasn't complicated or particularly interesting. I promised to be her legate and she promised to do her best to keep me from harm. It was supposed to be kept private, secret, but the pledge is broken so that doesn't matter anymore."

Mira glanced out at the King and Queen when the Queen announced Mira's surrender. She looked nervous.

"Was the pledge backed by the Wyrd," Rey signs quickly, "or was it a normal promise."

"At the time I honestly don't think I functionally recognized a difference. Even now it's hard for me to even conceive of breaking a promise. It goes against who I am. But no. It was not backed by the Wyrd."

Less returned from the Arena floor and Mira stood up as she anxiously waited to hear his news.

Less' eyes glanced around at all the people present, then settled on Mira. He spoke quietly, gently. "Veridia agrees to release you of all Legate duties and debts to her, but in return you must make a public, heart-felt apology for how you spoke to her earlier and," He paused, embarrassed by the onerous condition. "Serve as waitress at Autumn Court functions at which she attends for a year."

Mira was silent for a moment, her face unreadable as emotions fought for dominance. When she spoke, she didn't use sign language since not everyone present knew the same kinds of sign language. "*That's all?*" She puzzled over the punishment. In Autumn, the duties for supporting official functions like that were delegated to some automatons designed for it, and occasionally changelings who would do it in exchange for a little cash or a minor favor or two. It didn't seem harsh at all to her. The pleasant surprise was that it was something she at least had an idea how to do, even if she wasn't particularly good at remembering orders.

She suddenly gave Less a chesty hug. "*You really know how to talk to her don't you? I really appreciate this, Less. I owe you a big one.*"

In her mind it was a win. No one got hurt for her poorly chosen words to Veridia. She had to apologize publicly, and probably right away, but that was better than seeing anything worse happen. And she didn't have to work for Veridia anymore, excepting of course for the waitressing thing.

"I told you she cared about you," Rey signed in Glymjack.

"Indeed, I really think she does," said Less. "I think her worry for you might have clouded her judgement."

Mira's cheek twitched. "*Maybe... you two are right.*" She smiled drily. "*I feel bad for her if she really does think of me like a daughter. My mom and I used to have really terrible fights, too.*"

Rey hid a twinge of jealousy and pain behind a smile. "It's usually like that between two strong-willed people."

"*Most everyone is assembled,*" signed Less. "*Are you ready to apologise now? Or will you prepare?*"

Mira nodded. "*Yes. I'll apologize.*"

Less stood beside Rey as they watched Mira make her way to the empty Arena. The departing crowd noticed the activation of the Hedge-Gate and settled down once again, curious. "Something bothering you, Rey?" asked Less quietly. "Are you having trouble with Veridia as well?"

Rey glanced over at Less. "No, no problems with Veridia. At least no new ones," she replied softly in Glymjack Cant. "I'm fine, and I appreciate your concern," She placed a gentle hand on his arm, making sure to avoid an eye or a mouth.

Less touched her hand in response. They shared the moment as they watched poor Mira, all alone, looking

up at the assembled Duchy.

Veridia had called for her Autumn Court to assemble, but she meant to hear Mira's apology in the main chambers on the level above the Arena. That meant any other changeling wanting to watch could do so. Some did out of curiosity.

Lydia mixed in with other Autumn changelings and moved along, while Less, Rey, Doctor Tom and Drake found their way upstairs as well. Upon their arrival, they saw Mira standing before Veridia (who stood on the raised dias near the throne, but was not seated -- the Throne still belonged to the Winter King, not Autumn). Mira looked and felt very alone before the assembled members of Autumn and various other changelings of the freehold.

The whispery noise of the crowd settled down when Mira curtsied well enough to satisfy even Veridia, then went to her knees. She said loudly, clearly and without preamble, *"I apologize for my insult to my Queen and therefore my own court. By my surrender, I acknowledge the fairness and right of the Duel to resolve our dispute, accept your judgment upon me and throw myself upon your mercy."*

Queen Veridia looked steadily back at Mira. As Mira had given her apology, she'd met the Queen's eyes, but then humble cast her eyes down when she mentioned the result of the duel.

"Mira Naia." Veridia said, publicly using the name Mira had asked her to use twice in less than polite terms, "We understand you have been through very trying times of late. Your faith in your world has been shaken, even your faith in yourself. Only a couple weeks ago, you were made to forget your friends and closest allies and to do things against your will. This will not be discussed here, not by me nor any of my subjects." She cast a look around the room that penetrated more than a few gossips.

"And we are not unmerciful. We understand tempers grow hot, that you may have said things you would never have otherwise said. The apology is what I wanted. But you have also left my service well before our agreed upon time. I grant you your wish. Let all know that as of now you are no Legate of Mists, and that there will be no Voice of Autumn but my own for now. This hurts our Court, Mira, in ways you have not considered. But clearly, you are not ready for such responsibilities in any case. Therefore, Autumn will teach you to understand service.

"The penalty for abandoning your duties is that you shall serve Autumn in a manner I deem proper and fitting in all events I wish to attend for a period of one year. Whether you'll be a simple waitress or hostess will depend partly on you, Mira. But either way, you will serve Autumn for the length of time you promised me in a manner that honor Autumns and which is within reach of your... skills."

Mira nodded and kept her eyes lowered. Veridia stood looking at her for a while before she sighed impatiently. "Well? Off with you then. This is over."

Veridia turned on her heel, and gracefully flowed out of the room.

"That wasn't so bad," Rey said, more to herself than to anyone else. She turned to Doctor Tom and smiled. "I guess there's a couple of things I ought to tell you about our little motley, namely some perks of the pledge."

"And you'll be wanting to see the Hollow, I expect," added Less.

"Ah yes, of course! And I notice these hand symbols seem to have special meaning that I'm sure I wouldn't have fathomed before..." Tom said with a grin.

"We'll talk more about this somewhere with fewer ears," Rey replied as she glanced around, knowing there were undoubtedly people eavesdropping.

"Rey can give you the tour," said Less. He had just spied a couple of Spring Court members he needed to talk with. "I'll catch up with you later." He tipped them his hat and, with a spin of his umbrella, he strode off.

Less spent some time to look up a wind-wing changeling named Rena. As a former girlfriend of Drake's that his people had mentioned, he was curious if she might have any ill-will toward Mira as a result dating Drake lately. Rena didn't seem the jealous type, however.

He also found Nym, the dryad. She'd dated Drake longer but they had drifted apart and ending the relationship had been mutual. Again, he found no ill will -- just another rather naive elemental.

Finally, he looked up the fiery Tear, an elemental of Summer. This too, seemed an unlikely source of rumors against Mira or the motley -- her brief tryst with Drake had been planned and neither had wanted a long term relationship. Again, this seemed an unlikely source of ill will.

Drake had been rather tidy, romantically speaking.

Mira let Less know she was going to take his show of courage as an example and head home to her apartment. She called her vampire friends and got in touch with Amber, then collected the few things she had at Less's apartment. Drake escorted her back to Santa Fe

Meanwhile, Rey took Doctor Tom on a tour of the motley Hollow.

Beloved Lost and Found

Linguist Yearnings

Less sat in front of the library computer. The keyboard was filthy. The keys had a build-up of grease and dirt and between them it was a forest of hairs, skin flakes, and food. The mouse was not much better. He wasn't comfortable with computers but he'd done Google searches before with some success. Pushing his reluctance aside, he tapped in some search terms for the pronunciation of Irish Gaelic. He had decided to start with Irish because most of the old faerie tales had originated there. He scanned the list of results and decided on a "Beginner's Guide".

He sighed as he scrolled down through the tables of pronounced letters. The vowels and consonants weren't too bad, even with the accents. But then he came across further tables. Consonants could be broad, slender, aspirated, and eclipsed. Long and short diphthongs. What was with all the H's? Ah, it's not a letter; it is how they show the aspiration. He tried to match up the syllables with what he knew of the mysterious uh-face do.

The first syllable could be an 'a' as in ago or 'u' as in muck. The strange f sound was tougher. 'F' seemed to be pronounced as in English but it wasn't really an 'f'. 'fh' was silent in Irish, 'ph' was like 'f' in English again. Could it be 'ch' as in "loch"? He wasn't sure.

Armed with this shaky and amaturish knowledge of Irish, he called up a web page containing an Irish-to-English dictionary. He started with "do" since it was short and seemed like a word of its own. It could mean Your or Two depending if the vowel was long or short. Next, he scrolled through the A's. The closest thing was afach which meant however. Probably not. He tried the U's. Again, there was nothing with an 'f' sound

following. The closest thing was uafas which meant terror. 'Your terror.' It was plausible, he supposed, but he figured he was over his head. He would need to find a native speaker of the various Celtic languages and say it as he heard it in his dream to get anywhere concrete.

Young Blood

The morning after Mira stayed over at his apartment (Get your mind out of the gutter!) he was running late for work (Out, I say!) He jogged to the train station but he didn't have a shift that morning. His business was elsewhere.

After accessing his secret maze of tunnels throughout the Hedge from his office in the train station, he quickly changed into appropriate attire and sprinted to the distant Door. He paused before it to catch his breath and checked his watch, adding 14 hours. Less sighed in relief. It was still a few minutes before midnight. He waited until the last moment, wiping dry the sweat dripping from his forehead, and opened the Door.

The night air was acrid with some kind of industrial smoke. There were no stars visible. Less stepped into the street and tugged his scarf higher up his neck. He no longer felt the cold but it somehow made him feel more secure. The street was deserted.

He fished around in his bag for a box of matches. He was suddenly gripped with fear that he had somehow forgotten them. How? How could he have forgotten? With relief he found it in his coat pocket. He struck the match on the wall of the derelict shop. The flare illuminated a lantern with a clean shade of green glass. It looked out of place on the decrepit building. Lowering the glass over the lit candle, he leaned into the shop doorway to wait.

It wasn't long before a small crowd began to approach. They came hesitantly, two by two. They gathered in the occult green glow of the lamp, looking around at each other with fearful eyes. One figure, far taller than the rest reached out to knock on the door when Less stepped forward, suddenly appearing out of shadow. There was a collective wail of fear and several of the children dashed away to hide. Less breathed in the emotion and savoured it before addressing the woman in charge of the dozen or so children. The oldest was possibly twelve; no more, certainly.

"You have the payment?" he asked simply, holding out his hands as if to carry something. Most of his contacts here could not speak English.

She nodded and shrugged the sack she had carried slung across her back. Less looked inside and counted the bulging insulated foil bags. Only a fraction of the box he had supplied to her people. They didn't need resupplying just yet.

Less nodded and the woman left without a word, and didn't look back. He took his satchel off over his head and set it on the ground and knelt beside it. He drew back the flap and took out one of the brightly coloured lollipops and brandished it tantalizingly before the awed children. An older boy came forward and snatched it away and Less replaced it with a fist-full of more candy from the bag. It would draw them all in, even the ones that had skedaddled earlier.

Less rose and surveyed his new charges, all devouring the sugar in relative silence. He beckoned and opened the Door once again. The sight of the tunnel stretching away behind the old door caused a new wave of fear (which he happily ate) but all it took was another beckon to get them to cross the threshold. He had no idea what stories the people who collected these children told them to prepare them for this journey. All he knew was that, whatever it was, it wouldn't prepare them for the reality. Their parents had given them up, perhaps with the hope that they would find a better life in America, perhaps for money. He would do what he could to get them to parents wanting to circumvent the restrictive adoption process. The Bleak Seal would profit handsomely from the proceeds, and he had a sack full of sweet, young blood.

He shook a shiver from his body. Why had he thought that? Sweet, young blood? Disgusting!

March 21, 2012

Days passed and Winter began to fade into Spring. It was a week and a half after the Duel.

Doctor Tom spent much of his time in the Hollow renovating and improving some of the house that had

fallen to disrepair since Rover had grown distant from the motley and eventually left off renewing his motley pledge.

Rey received word at last from Richard that he had been helping an old friend, but that he couldn't talk about it yet

The lack of information frustrated Rey, but there was nothing she could do about it so she channeled that energy into her efforts with Marie and her friends. With Marie's help - and Aurra's approval - Rey purchased a membership to Blood Tears and was brought into the exclusive and elusive Third Tier membership. She was officially introduced to most of the witches, many of whom she had met very briefly the night she'd been shot and Yvonne healed her leg. To those she'd remembered had been obviously frightened of Richard, she apologized, explaining he was very protective of her.

A good part of her first evening with the witches was spent answering questions. A few of the women were fascinated by her appearance, and Rey fielded many questions from them. Only the boldest of them came really close, most of them made nervous by her obviously inhuman appearance and the wisps darting around her. One woman gasped in alarm, claiming something evil had peeked out of Rey's hair at her.

There was one moment when things had become tense, when one of the witches reached out and touched Rey. The Fairest's brambles sprang into motion of their own accord, wrapping themselves around the woman's wrist and hand, drawing blood from a several shallow but painful scratches. The thorny vines withdrew with a thought from Rey, and with a few gentle words soothed both the woman's fears and ego - after taking a sip or two of the witch's emotions.

When the group had broken up, Rey was invited to go join the "festivities" upstairs. She politely refused, saying she'd come for the companionship and company of the witches, not for sex. A brunette asked if Rey might bring Richard one day, Rey replied probably not, as the club wasn't his kind of place.

Before Rey went home for the night, Aurra explained to Rey all the privileges of being a Third Tier member - including being able to arrive and leave through a rear entrance if she chose. The changeling planned to make good use of it, knowing that being seen entering and leaving Blood Tears too often might cause some problems for her reputation..

Mira got back to work at her old job and surprisingly, nothing horrible happened at her old apartment. Whether the wards were doing their job or life was just giving her a break, she didn't know, but she knew better than to tempt Fate by questioning her good fortune. She was happy to live her life in relative peace. The fact that Drake called several times and they enjoyed some dates on some of those nights she had free, spiced things up enough to make Mira forget her recent troubles and become more comfortable with who she was now. Amber was home at the apartment with Mira as well, and she'd developed more of a social life, just as Mira had.

Less could see the confidence begin to return to Mira, as well. At first nervous about returning to her apartment, it soon evaporated when she realized her heavenly tub had been repaired. Less had been perturbed by Mira's sudden departure back to Santa Fe. He had understood she was going to stay until they could find something for her that no one knew the location of. He had spent a couple of hours going over a fold-away bed from Craigslist for bedbugs. Still, she had seemed happy to return home so Less wasn't about to say anything to disturb that. Until, that is, the dreams started.

The Ice Queen had told him to keep the sorceress close. Only she could know the face do for what it was. It had started with a few appearances of the pale woman in his shifting dreams. Forgotten memories, perhaps. They had steadily become more insistent, more terrifying. It was to the point that he worked late into the night to avoid sleep and tossed and turned for only a couple of hours before he fled his bed once again. He had to do something to reunite himself with Mira. He was desperate.

By the time of the grand party marking the transition to Spring, Less had received RSVPs from all over the Duchy. Changelings were in the mood for a celebration it seemed. Even Veridia had responded with a definite affirmative, though it was well known she was no fan of Ishtar. Mira had created four large ice sculptures to both Winter's and Spring's specifications, and all the party supplies, food, and entertainment had been arranged without issue.

As the Spring Welcome approached, Less was fairly strung out on Jarmyn leaves, but his dreams had lessened somewhat. As part of his late-night scheming to poison Mira and Drake's relationship, he had convinced Squire Lyre and the Spring Court organizer to devise a changeling scavenger hunt. There were separate lists for men and women. The items started off as fairly mundane Wintery items from the Hall - a snowflake, a glove. As the items progressed to Spring they became more esoteric and saucy - a sunbeam, transformation, exposed skin. A couple of items Less had designed to ensure Drake was plagued by female attentions as midnight was passed. A kiss stolen from a shining knight, a Summer warrior's garment...

On the night of the Spring Welcome, Less dressed in the Winter King's suit Rey had given him. He was there to open the ceremonies and give a short speech and thank the staff before the food and sculptures were unveiled. When he finished, Ishtar congratulated Winter on such a well-organized and fantastic party to celebrate the occasion, and other such niceties.

Food was brought out and occupied long tables. It was kept warm by tastefully burning jars and was accessories with various matching cutlery and plates. Next came the ice statues. Three of them were well done and represented the various seasons. Spring was treated to an over-sized statue of Ishtar sitting upon the Duchy's Throne. Summer flames of ice had been woven in the general shape of a crowned King. Autumn-bent ice-stalks of corn made eerie homage to Autumn. But it was the sculpture of Winter that won noises of amazement and awe from onlookers. Here Mira had taken the mortal view of King Seleman, dressed in a somewhat more updated suit, standing like a titan with a huge orb held high over his head between his raised hands. The orb was frosted ice to make it look like a giant eye. But it had an iris arranged on four sides so that it became an all-seeing Eye.

Veridia had sent Mira the outfit she expected to be worn at the event. It was a black waitressing uniform dress complete with a small white apron. The sleeves ended above the elbows. It was loose around her chest, but fit her waist nicely. The skirt was voluminous but not puffy in the style of a maid's uniform. Indeed her dress looked nicer than what most of the changeling attendees were wearing. She kept busy bringing out drinks to members of the Autumn Court and others. Plenty other members of the Duchy mistook her role and had asked her to bring them drinks, too, despite the fact that Mira mostly paid attention just to Autumn Courtiers.

But Mira brought these others drinks and filled their orders without complaint, though she had her own solution to the issue. Anyone who asked her to bring them drinks that were not of the Autumn Court were charged for the service above the normal price of any drinks, and which she kept as cash fairly earned.

Drake found himself pursued by enthusiastic participants of the scavenger hunt, and somehow wound up losing a shoe, his belt, and his jacket to female fans. Although, he swore he saw Maximus Spectre with his shoe. At least he was pretty sure it was Max, because he was sure Gwennyth Paltrow was not actually in attendance. But his mood was lightened considerably when he snuck out to meet with Mira when she took a break.

"I don't know," Mira signed. She feigned hurt and jealousy as she gave him a light-hearted scolding. "You didn't look too unhappy to be chased around the ballroom by Verdie and Teara." Her eyes narrowed albeit with amusement. "And who was the girl that kissed you and ran off with your shoe? The one that looked like the actress who played Pepper Pots in Iron Man? I think you enjoyed that."

"That kiss shouldn't count," Drake replied with mock dismay. "That wasn't a girl. That was Max Spectre. Besides." His voice dropped to an intimate whisper. "Every time a woman approached me, I pretended it

was you."

Mira pretended shock. "What? Well if that kiss you gave Max was imagined to be with me, I'm unimpressed. That was not a toe-curling experience if I'm anyone to judge."

Drake sighed. "Then I guess I'm going to need a lot more practice kissing other women while pretending they're you. Or do I just need more practice kissing you?"

"As long as I'm involved, you can do all the kissing you like," Mira signed with a look in her eyes the Devil himself would be proud of. She moved as close as she could without actually touching him. Her eyes dared him to impress her.

Keeping the distance between them, he lowered her head so that only his lips touched hers. The kiss matched the look in Mira's eyes, both taunting and demanding at once, with unspoken promises for later in the evening. When they broke away, Mira purred, "Now that's a kiss." She wanted to run off to some corner with Drake, but duty called and it wasn't one she could walk away from. Reluctantly, she headed back to work, though it took all her will not to grab him right there. To Drake's gratification, it showed in her eyes.

Richard was present for the occasion, and having staked out a spot he could observe two of his motley mates, Veridia and Lydia, he stood like the big, brooding Paladin of Shadows he was. Only tonight, if Rey's eyes weren't deceiving her, he looked much more broody than most.

She approached him from the side, just within what she knew was the range of his wide vision plane. Her smile showed her pleasure at seeing him. "Hi," she said as she looked up at him, wondering what was bothering him.

"Hello Rey," he said, given his usual greeting. The smile that flickered there for a moment, however, was only a shadow of what it usually was. "How have you been?"

"Busy," she replied. "Lots of paperwork, as usual, with the casino, and we brought in a new member to our motley. How about you?"

He looked away, debating how much he should tell her. But the truth was that he'd already decided to ask her for help. Now he was only procrastinating. "Not as well," he admitted. "Someone I thought was gone forever walked back into my life a couple weeks ago."

Rey held back a frown. "I see. Is there any way I could help?"

Richard hedged. "I don't know. Yes. If you were willing..."

She closed the distance between them and put her hand on his arm. "I'd never have volunteered if I wasn't willing."

Richard's eyes became haunted. "It's been 60 years. I thought she was long dead. I never expected my wife to come walking back into my life looking as if she hadn't aged a day."

"Your wife." Rey felt as if the ground was starting to crumble beneath her feet. She knew her face had paled, but it was all she could do not to shriek. "What did she want?"

Richard's jaw muscles bulged as he stared at the floor. He ground out, "My help. I think I told you a couple months ago that I was married before I was Taken. But she left me after having fallen in with a bad crowd, people I suspected to be vampires. She'd become some kind of groupie, but I had no idea how bad it was. Not until now. She seems like the same person in a lot of ways. When she begged me for help, that she'd die if I couldn't help her..." He shook his head and fell silent.

Rey forced her hands to relax, and her voice was much calmer than she felt. "This isn't the time or place for this discussion. Perhaps after the party. We can talk in private then."

Less had been occupied playing host to various games for much of the evening, but as soon as Ishtar had a chance to approach him without interrupting some party function or other, she did.

"You really outdid yourself, King Seleman," she congratulated. "You've really kept their interest with the games. You lined up art the Duchy had never seen before, and your taste has been excellent tonight. Spring is grateful to have such talent in our neighboring Season."

Less accepted the compliments gracefully. "If you're talking about the ice sculptures, that is the work of Mira Naia. She has become quite the sculptress!"

"And a member of your motley," Ishtar added. "You seem to have a number of highly skilled people near you. Speaking of which, how did your interview with Doctor Tom go?"

"Pretty well," Less admitted. "He seemed willing to accept the danger of being part of the Glymjacks in return for the freedom to pursue his medical research."

Ishtar chuckled softly. "That sounds like Tom."

Silence fell over them and they were able to absorb the ambient sounds of light-hearted revelry. They saw Mira step out of a side room that was being used for storage with a pair of wine bottles hugged under an arm. Her face wasn't toward them, but she smoothed her dress and walked toward the beverage station with a little sway in her hips.

Ishtar didn't miss a thing. Her eyes flicked to Less. "Someone is enjoying her new role at least a little. She has you to thank for that. That was a very brave thing you did." She smiled. "Tell me, King Seleman. What would you have done if Veridia hadn't wanted to talk things out in the Arena a couple weeks ago?"

Less looked away and pretended to find something of interest on the ice statue of himself. It was melting now and was looking very phallic - likely by Spring's design. "Veridia asked me once what all my eyes really saw. I would have shown her." It probably wouldn't have saved him from defeat, but he would have targetted the mad queen's weak spot - her psyche. He turned back to the Queen and put on smiles for her benefit. "But I knew she wouldn't fight. Why? Did you lose a bet or something?"

Ishtar laughed. "No. I didn't want to encourage that kind of thing, though I know many did place bets on who the victor would be.

The King and Queen noticed Drake slipping out the door of the store room Mira had so recently left. "Now there's a handsome Fairest, and a warrior of Summer, too. It seems to me that your young friend might be living up to her nymph name." She watched Less out of the corner of her eye, gauging his reaction.

Less fled to the sanctity of his elemental nature to still the storm clouds within him. Despite his efforts to preoccupy Drake tonight, he was still proving to be...irksome. "And apparently talented. Maybe we should invite him to be a member of the motley, too." He tried to change the subject. "Have you seen Claire around? I've been meaning to speak with her."

Ishtar glanced around. "Not late-- ah. I think that is her standing near the Paladin of Shadows." A look in that direction showed the robed Claire standing by a column. Richard and Rey were standing near each other, apparently speaking quietly and Claire was politely waiting so as not to interrupt.

"She looks like she's busy at the moment. Shall we dance? I would like to hear what plans you have for the

Duchy once you take the throne once again."

"Yes of course," she responded immediately. Less noticed that Ishtar's eyes widened slightly and a shadow of worry temporarily passed across her face. It was gone so fast that he could be sure that a less perceptive man would never have noticed. Her expression then showed she was pleased he asked.

The Queen was of course an excellent dancer. Sensuous yet proper, she was extremely capable. She held back, following Less's lead gracefully. "Healing, I think, shall be my theme this year. Last year was difficult and this Spring is the first one since I came to power that we have not had either emergencies or war to deal with. Now it is time for renewal, I think."

He stumbled a step but Ishtar was too graceful to be disturbed by a misstep. He was trying to work out what she, an experienced queen and a goddess, could find worrisome about her season in charge. "The Winter of Mourning is finally over. I'm sure many are looking forward to your rule." He concentrated on his steps for a few moments. "You are well-known for your metamorphoses. I'm surprised you have no big transformations planned for us, the Duchy."

"There is a time for new beginnings," Ishtar agreed. "But there is also a time for rest." As they continued to dance, Less realized she was not uncomfortable discussing her reign. It must have been something else. Was it something about the dancing? But she seemed to be enjoying herself. "You are quite a capable dancer, King Seleman, and that is not empty flattery," she added with a smile.

"Thank you!" said Less appreciatively. Ishtar's compliment added to his confidence and the steps came easier and with more vim. "I dare say that you were worried I would destroy your expensive shoes!"

Ishtar laughed lightly. "I think that after tonight, no one will be afraid you might step on their feet."

Less's thoughts flashed on Drake. "A shame. But I suppose it will have its uses." Something that he's been spending his late nights on suddenly jogged in his brain. "Say, do you happen to know anyone who speaks a Gaelic language, do you? Like old Irish?"

Ishtar smiled widely. "Why yes I do. Me. I'm not an expert, and I'm not perfectly fluent, but I can manage."

"Really?" He looked at her with a little suspicion. It was all very convenient. "Can you tell me what uh-face do means?" He tried to get the pronunciation correct. Though he was trying to remember a dream, it was eerily clear in his mind.

Ishtar puzzled over it, then asked if they might stop dancing while she tried to mentally wade through the pronunciation. "Well, the Irish word for dubh sounds a lot like 'do', and that means black. Uhface. Uvace. Uchae. Could it have been a very soft ch sound as in Bach but less with the saliva at the back of the throat?"

When pronounced it did sound like it could have been mistaken for an 'f' sound and Less was able to confirm that.

"Okay. Well, I might be wrong about this, but the easiest match is Eochair Dubh, the Black Key." She watched him curiously. "What does it mean?"

"I don't know," he said honestly. "I've been brushing up on my knowledge of the occult and I overheard a couple talking of a hidden artifact." He paused for effect and lowered his voice. "I think they might have been vampires. I'll talk to Rey. She's a Sage; she might have more of an idea."

Worry marked Ishtar's brow. "Vampires? Please be very careful, King Winter. If you get in over your head," she shot a glance toward Mira, revealing she was perhaps more aware of certain situations than most, "call me."

Less noted Ishtar's look to Mira. "Oh, don't worry about it. Mira's contact with vampires means we hobnob with them all the time. But I appreciate your offer of help. Do I just call your hotline?"

"Yes, that should work," she said.

Less bowed to his dancing partner. "Thank you for the dance, Queen Ishtar. I, for one, will be glad to vacate the throne for a time. It has been a gruelling season but the Winter Courtiers managed to step up to the task, in the end. I hope they have enjoyed the party. It was as much a thank you for their hard work as a welcome to Spring."

"And thank you for asking. You are an excellent dance partner," she flattered him. "I appreciate the party you put together. All of Spring has been excited about it."

Less spotted Mira passing nearby. She had just brought a thin-stemmed glass of red wine to Veridia and was on her way back with an empty. If he didn't miss his guess, the pockets at the front of the decorative little apron she wore were bulging with cash.

"Mira!" called Less, perhaps a bit too emphatically. "I'm sorry you could not enjoy my party without working. How is it going, your new status at Court?"

Mira stopped and went over to him. "Hi!" she signed with a smile. "Well, I'd say it's been going pretty well. I only have to serve Autumn according to the rules. Lots of other changelings just see me waitressing, though, and assume I'm here to server everyone. I don't argue about it. I just go get their drinks. And then I charge them half again the cost and keep the difference." She winked at him. "I figure if they want the service, then they can pay for it or get it themselves."

"Clever girl!" said Less with a smile. At that moment the Hall's giant clock struck midnight. The magic of the party began changing everyone's attire to one more appropriate for Spring. In Less' case, the winter breezes of his suit turned to a squall. In seconds his black suit turned a pale blue and he was drenched with April showers.

The change took Mira by surprise, though she was looking at Less's outfit and didn't notice the cool, dampness of heavy mists clinging to her waitressing uniform. Gone was the formal black dress and little white apron. In its place was a pale green uniform instead. The mist made it cling to her body, but the extra moisture was no more unfamiliar to her than a dip in a mountain spring.

She glanced around and saw similar changes envelop their fellow partiers. "You and Ishtar outdid yourselves with this one!"

Less noticed Rey waving to get their attention.

Emboldened by his success with Ishtar, Less had been considering inviting Mira to dance. Rey's signal made a convenient excuse to avoid the whole traumatic experience. "Something's up with Rey," he pointed out. "Take a break from work and let's see what she needs."

Mira smiled mischievously and said, "Who am I to question the order of a King?"

Rey noticed some movement out of the corner of her eye. When she turned her head slightly she saw Claire. "Hello, Claire," Rey said, a polite little smile automatically coming to her face.

Claire nodded silently but remained where she was.

"Do you need something?" rumbled Richard irritably.

"I haven't seen you for a while. I only wanted to catch up."

Richard frowned in hospitably. "No thanks. I'm not in the mood."

Claire's expression became brittle in response to Richard's rudeness. "Sorry to have bothered you two, then." She turned to walk away.

Rey shot Richard a quick glance and tried hard not to roll her eyes. "I'm sorry, Claire," she said. "It's been a rough couple of weeks, and this is the first chance we've had to take a breath and talk, you know?" Rey gave Claire a look, asking for patience.

Claire glanced up at Richard's eyes. "Sure. Take your time. I'll be around."

Richard stared after her for a moment, then said, "I should go. I'm not in the mood for a party."

"We could go to my place," Rey offers, curving her fingers around his arm in a gentle caress.

"There isn't much time," he said.

Her grip on his arm tightened ever so slightly. "I thought it would be a better place to talk," she said, with a slight emphasis on the last word. "That you wanted to get away from this." She waved her free hand at the assembled partygoers. "We can find someplace here to talk if you prefer it." She fought to keep a calm expression on her face. How could he think she was thinking of sex when he needed her help?

He nodded. "That would be best. I was hoping you'd be able to convince your motley mates to help because they are the ones with connections I need to do this. I'm feeling frustrated because I want to ask them now, but they need to be here playing host or," he nodded toward Mira, "serving drinks apparently."

"Well, Mira doesn't exactly have a say in that," Rey said, and she told him about the duel. "I'm certain when the party is over I can gather them up and we can meet. Until then, perhaps there is something I can get a head start on?"

"I need access to members of something called the Barony of Shadows for questioning," he said. "I've been getting nowhere for two weeks on this."

Rey thought for a moment, then shook her head. "I've never heard of them, but Mira or Less may have." Her head tilts slightly to one side. "Is there anything else I might be able to help with?"

"Yes, but we need access to this Barony first," Richard said. "Damned vampires and their secrets."

Rey nodded. "I'll go find the others and let them know we need to meet up as soon as possible." She gave Richard's arm a reassuring squeeze before heading off to find her motley mates.

As she'd been talking with Richard, Rey's gown of snowflakes and ice appeared to have melted away and was replaced with early spring mist. The water vapor shifted as she moved, providing glimpses of the curves Richard knew intimately to anyone who chose look.

As he watched her walk away, Richard's expression lightened. He couldn't help but enjoy the view.

He wasn't the only one.

The compliments Rey received she accepted with grace, a flirtatious smile and playful wave of the hand.

One man, a Draconic member of the Spring Court who'd perhaps had a bit too much to drink, was persistent. Enough to cause her brambles to shift with annoyance.

The transformations of attire to celebrate the arrival of Spring was echoed all around the chambers, though none had so dramatic a change as Rey's had been designed to.

Richard's own clothes matched the violence of a spring storm as he glared at Juliani, the Draconic daring to come too close to his girl. He stalked after Rey.

"Again," Rey said, trying to break off the conversation with Juliani without having to give the man the cut direct, "I do appreciate your compliments, but I am in a relationship with someone I care deeply about. I am happy, and have no desire to find someone new. Or a brief liaison."

"You misunderstand my intentions," Juliani said with a slight bow. "I would never come between a woman and her heart's desire." He showed a wily smile. "I simply wished to ask you to dance as the floor has not yet been graced by your presence this evening."

Richard's voice rumbled with hostility. "Get lost, you little fop."

Juliani looked offended and angry.

"Please, accept my apologies," Rey said smoothly, her exotic scent drifting around her as she attempted to calm the situation down. "It is too wonderful a night to allow it to be ruined by misunderstandings." She shifted how she was standing so that she was touching Richard, hoping the contact would help.

Richard glared silently at Juliani until the flustered spring courtier finally turned without another word and left.

Less, with his hair plastered wet against his scalp and otherwise soaked through with fragrant rain, and Mira, looking springy in her clinging green dress, approached Rey together. There was a look of mild worry in Less' eyes at her urgency. He signed, "What is it?"

"We need to find someplace where the only ears present are ours," Rey quickly signed back, "then I'll tell you." She led Less, Mira and Richard to a small room a short distance away from the party. When the door was closed behind them, she looked at the minotaur and then to her motley mates.

"I need your help," she said, eschewing their secret language so Richard could understand the conversation. "Do either of you know anything about the Barony of Shadows?"

Mira hesitated, looking to Less to answer first.

Less nodded. "Yes. It is the group of vampires that lives in the subway tunnels. Remy warned us to leave them alone."

Rey didn't remember that, but she let it go. "What else do you know about them?"

"Not much at all," he replied honestly. "I have made some attempt at communication because of my proximity to them. One of the train drivers is being fed on by one of the vampires. I have had some success, but it is sporadic."

"Do you have a way to get in contact with them, to arrange a meeting?" Rey asked, then watched Richard's face out of the corner of her eye. He was taking a keen interest in anything Less said.

"I do," he said cautiously. "But I have only ever talked with this one vampire I mentioned." He left out the one that Snow had captured. "They do not seem to like contact and I do not know how they will respond to a request to meet with a group of us."

Rey looked at Mira. "Do you think Remy might be able to arrange a meeting for us quickly? A woman's life is at stake." Her gut felt like a knife was twisting as she fought to maintain a calm demeanor.

Mira looked at Rey for a long moment. "I have no idea. I'll ask. Who should we ask to meet with, though?"

"Uh, the Baron maybe," Richard rumbled irritably, sounding as if that was the dumbest question he'd heard all night.

"Oh yeah," Mira said sheepishly. "Sorry." Mira was silent a moment. Richard's tone hadn't bothered her, but the look on Rey's face did. "Rey, are you okay?"

"No, I'm not." Rey's tone was calm and neutral, perhaps too much so. "Richard, I think now is the time to tell us what's going on. That way we know what we're getting into, and if there might be other ways to get the information you need and to help her."

Mira frowned, her eyes narrowing at Richard. Whatever it was going on, it was making Rey angry. He could talk to Mira as if she was an idiot, but he better not be acting that way toward Rey, Mira decided.

Richard said, stiffly, "This isn't the kind of trouble any of you need. Just get me a meeting with this Baron of Shadows and I'll get what I need from him."

"What are you willing to give for such a meeting?" asked Less. "The Baron isn't going to invite you for tea just because you asked."

As Less spoke, Rey turned her back on the assembled group and, unaware she had murmured anything, sat down in a chair with a grace and poise she didn't feel.

Mira's breath caught in surprised little gasp, having heard what Rey said. She looked a dozen questions at the back of Rey's head, but kept her silence.

Finally, she cleared her throat. "Less, do you think your contact can set up a meet? We can ask Remy, but since he is not associated with the Baron, except possibly as an enemy, I'm sure that it will not be cheap. He will require a favor of some kind." Mira kept her eyes on Rey, wondering when the powder keg would explode.

"Sure, I can ask," said Less, looking at Richard. "But I have to have a reason, and a compelling one at that if you expect the Baron to bother."

He sighed. "Fine. In 1953, the year I was taken, I had a wife. She fell in with a bad crowd and got swept up in it. Before I knew it she was addicted to vampire blood. I was going to confront the vampire bitch that did it to her when I was Taken. I returned 44 years later, 1987. There was no sign of my wife and I assumed that vampires had made her disappear. Surely she'd be dead or turned by that time, right?"

"Wrong. She's still alive. She's been a blood slave to her vampire master for 58 years!" Richard's bellow was full of pain. "I had left her with that monster for all this time."

"She came to me a couple weeks ago, desperate. I don't know how she found me, but it was definitely her looking as if she hadn't aged a day since 1953. She told me her master had been taken from her that she needed to get her back. If the master didn't return within a month, then the magic that binds my ... wife... as

a slave would come unravelled and she would age and die. She might be taken on by another vampire, but that's unlikely. Vampires are a paranoid lot and would prefer a blood slave such as her to be destroyed rather than risk betrayal by taking her on.

"She also told me that her master served someone called the Baron of Shadows, that she was a part of this Baron's domain. I've been trying to get information as to where the missing vampire was last spotted, who she was with, but I have come up empty every time I tried poking around. I need this Baron to make his people talk in order for me to do as my wife asked."

Mira stared in shock. She didn't say a word.

"Why did she come to you?" Rey asked, her voice level but barely above a whisper.

He shrugged. "I don't think anyone else gives a damn about her or her master."

"A missing person!" exclaimed Less. "Now that I can help with. I'll get word to my contact in the Barony and send word to the Bleak Seal to start digging. What do you know about your wife's master? Your wife's name and photo would help too."

Mira's eyes turned to Richard. She studied him while he answered Less's question.

"I know what Betty told me. Betty Muldrow. At least, that was her name when we were married. I don't have a picture of her but you could meet her in person. I have her in a safe place right now. Her master is named Caterina Lebedev. Ukrainian and has a Slavic accent. Pale, black hair, dark eyes."

"She still loves you," Mira murmured gently. "That's why she thought she could come to you, isn't it?"

Richard jerked, startled. Mira was the last person he expected to be in any way perceptive, but today she was hitting everything square on the head. He didn't answer, just shoved his hands in his pockets and shrugged. He was so obviously deeply conflicted, everyone could see it in his face and his posture.

Rey, who had been looking back at Richard over her shoulder, clenched her jaw to keep from making an involuntary sound of dismay. After a moment, she said "Does anyone have a handkerchief I can borrow?"

Less immediately pulled his handkerchief from his breast pocket. It was still wet but the magical rain evaporated quickly as he handed it to Rey.

Rey reached out to take it, trying but failing to hide the blood on the palm of her hand as she did so.

"Yes, I think meeting your wife is a fine idea," said Less as he wrote down the details of the vampire.

Mira saw what Rey had done to herself but she kept quiet. Drawing attention to it wouldn't help here.

Richard, however, was less reticent. Anger crinkled his brow as he watched his girlfriend hurt herself, much as his wife had when she first came to him. She'd pushed him hard, trying to get him to hit her as if the physical pain would expunge the emotional pain she was in. It was disturbing and wrong and it angered him that Rey seemed to be doing the same thing. Instead of reacting, though, he turned away.

"I can take you to her now if you want. She has nine days left, so it's better if we don't wait," he said.

Mira wanted more than anything to take Rey's hand and comfort her and bandage her hands. But she well knew Rey's temper and that she'd likely only make things worse. Instead, she put her hand in the crook of Less's elbow so she wouldn't do anything stupid and said, "I'm sure Veridia will let me go if the Winter King tells her it's important."

"I appreciate it," Rey said softly as she wiped her hands, though her eyes were on Richard. He'd tried to hide what he was feeling, but she could read it in the way he moved and the emotions in his eyes. To her surprise, she felt gratitude at his actions, at his lack of overt response. It gave her a chance to take a step back, to calm down and recenter herself. Focus on saving Betty and, hopefully, ignore how important this woman once was to him.

She tucked the now bloody handkerchief into her pocket. "I'll return this later, once I've washed it."

"Please, keep it," said Less gently. He gave Richard an uncharitable look. An evening he had been looking forward to for some time was completely unsalvageable. Worse still, it seemed it would take Rey a lot longer than an evening to get over the situation he had embroiled them into. "I'll need to say my goodbyes and extract Mira from her duties. I'll try to keep it to under an hour. Where shall we meet you?"

"Parking Lot A of Iron Mountain Park," Richard said. That would take them out of the Hedge and into the mortal realm again.

"See you there," Rey said to Less and Mira as she moved to stand next to Richard. She continued to watch him, keeping an eye on his mood and reactions. She had no idea if he'd turn from her, or be willing to listen to what she had to say when the others had left.

After Less and Mira left, Richard was prepared to leave as well, but he stopped when he noticed Rey looking at him.

"I want to apologize for the way I've been acting since you came to me for help," she said to him, her voice soft and contrite. "It was very childish of me. All I did was cause you more pain, and that is the last thing I want to do." Rey met his gaze, hoping he'd forgive her.

His eyes softened. "It's okay, Rey. I don't mean to be so... gruff. It's just that every time I see her I remember what it was like when Betty and I first met. She was always a little on the wild side and I... not so much. But she was a good person, you know? Now the Betty I see is... not right. She's broken. Really broken. She isn't the person she was and it's hard to even look at her. It's like seeing an accident involving people you used to care about. You don't want to see it, because what's left of them isn't really them anymore.

"Only it's worse because she's still alive. She still tries to be who she was, but she just... isn't."

"I understand," Rey replied, though she wouldn't pretend to know what he was going through. "We'll do everything we can to help her." She took one of his massive hands in hers and gave it a reassuring squeeze. Rey wanted to give him a quick, chaste kiss but held back, not sure if it was the right thing to do.

After a moment, Richard said, "We better go. It won't do to have Less and Mira waiting for us in the parking lot."

Less, sobered by Richard and Rey's pain, found the transition back into the party atmosphere difficult. Laughter grated his nerves and he wanted to avoid all contact with Courtiers. He brushed off any advances, wanting only to make his politically-necessary goodbyes and secure Mira's release.

Mira, still on his arm, hoped to lighten his mode. "It really was a lovely party," she said quietly. "And maybe now that it's Spring's time to rule, we'd be leaving soon anyway..."

She might have been close to the truth. When he took a brief, mental head-count, Less noted that nearly all the Autumn Courtiers had departed already. Many didn't have much stomach for Spring it would seem. Less spotted Veridia herself slowly making her way toward the exit.

"It looks like your shift is over," said Less. Mira only had to serve at Duchy functions while the Autumn Queen was in attendance. "Still, we should say good-night and see if she was satisfied with your work."

The pair caught Veridia near the exit to the hall. "It was a pleasure seeing you, Veridia. I hope you and your courtiers enjoyed yourselves," said Less pleasantly.

Veridia nodded, a slight smile touching the corners of her mouth. "I did, actually. Your party was marvelous and I'm sure the entire Duchy applauds your effort." She looked at his companion. "Mira, you did well tonight. Some of the other Courtiers are retiring to Viscissitude's apartment for private revelry. I'll be retiring for the night and so your duties are at an end. You may win some points if you join the others at Sissy's place."

Mira shook her head and curtsied formally. "Thank you, no, my lady. I will prefer to take my leave."

Veridia looked past them both. "I'm sure your young man will be disappointed." She gave a final bow of respect to Less and turned to go.

Mira turned around. "Oh! Drake..."

Less released her arm and let her go. He turned as well, looking to see if the Summer warrior was in sight.

Drake was on the other side of the room, chatting with the gristlegrinder they'd interviewed as a potential new member for the Glymjacks. He glanced over at Mira and a smile made of potential and promise covered his face.

"We should hurry," suggested Less, though he made no move to prevent Mira from going to Drake to explain the situation.

Mira nodded and shot Less a smile. She then hurried over to Drake. She signed, "Hi Drake, looks like my 'shift' here is done. But the motley calls and I have to run out." Her eyes were regretful.

"I understand," Drake replied, and took Mira's hand in his so he could kiss her fingertips. "Call me when you're free." He turned her hand over and pressed a slow, lingering kiss to the pulse point on inside of her wrist. "We can pick up where we left off here, or perhaps go in a new direction." He released her hand, letting it trail from his.

Mira's eyes were brightly lit from the faint flush she showed as her pulse quickened. "I'd like that," she signed.

Watching Mira with Drake reminded Less that he hadn't managed to catch up with Claire over the course of the evening. To cover his impatience, he made his leaving of the party public. With the monarchs gone for the evening, the rest of the courtiers could enjoy themselves with abandon.

Richard and Rey were waiting for Mira and Less in the parking lot. Richard stood in front of his jeep. "Shall we ride together?"

"Fine with me," Rey replied. "I walked here tonight." True, it wasn't the best of areas to be doing that in, especially if she cut through the woods, but she wasn't going to let a bit of fear stop her from going places.

Less exchanged a look with Mira. "We don't have vehicles so I guess we're going with you."

Richard opened the door to let Mira and Less into the small back seat. Mira began to climb in, then quickly

backed out. "Oh god. I'm so sorry Rey! I think he's dead..."

When Rey stuck her head in to take a look, she saw what Mira had noticed. Hamilton was lying in the back seat, legs folded along his body as he sprawled on his back. With his mouth open and tongue lolling to the side like that, Rey immediately saw why Mira thought he was dead. But he was just sleeping deeply. Rey could have sworn she saw a little cat smile on his furry face in response to Mira's remark but that would have been impossible. Cat's can't smile, can they?

"Oh no," Rey cried out, and scooped up Hamilton's "lifeless" body. "No. Wait! I've seen this before. He's been put under some sort of curse." Her face radiated hope through her tears. "Perhaps a kiss will wake him?" She extended her arms slightly, offering Hamilton to her. Even to her own ears, her acting sucked, but it'd be worth it to have a bit of fun with her friend.

No one bought Rey's poor attempt at acting, including Mira. But Mira was up for playing the game and her attempt at acting could have landed her a spot on TV. She stepped forward and bent over Hamilton, looking closely. Suddenly, she stood up, her face red and blotchy. "Oh my god! He's got rat on his breath! I'm deathly allergic to rats!" She made a strangled sound and struggled to breathe as if her wind pipe was closing up. She staggered into Less's arms.

Richard's eyes became huge. He hadn't known there was a cat in his jeep, much less about Mira's allergy. "Oh shit! Do you give an adrenalin shot for this? Is she in shock? What do we do?"

Less and Rey, however, knew Mira had no such allergy of any kind.

Hamilton sprang to his feet. "I'll have you know that is tuna on my breath you little hussy!" Which meant of course, that he'd broken into Rey's locked cabinet of tuna treats again.

"I take it I need to buy more cat treats," Rey asked mildly.

Less innocently (or seemingly so) ran his hands along the skin of Mira's bare arms as he guided her to the back seat of the Jeep. He imagined it as slick, hard ice. He was a little confused, but mostly relieved, at Rey's change in emotional state. The cat seemed to brighten her up considerably. "Consider this your punishment for upsetting Rey," he told Richard.

"Let it alone, Less," Rey said, her voice firm and brooking no arguments. "Hamilton's prank had nothing to do with Richard or me. So, we will let it go, not act like children, and move on. Betty needs our help and the clock is ticking." Her tone softened when she spoke to Hamilton. "We'll talk about this later, okay?"

Hamilton responded by tromping over Mira's and Less's laps, ostensibly to find a comfortable place to sit. When an eye on Less's hand blinked at him, he jumped, ears flattened and then tried a couple, tentative swats. He then decided Rey's lap was safer and hopped into the front as Rey climbed in, and then settled on her lap.

Now that everyone had piled in, Richard sighed, started the jeep and put it in gear. The trip to Richard's safe house took about 20 minutes.

They arrived in front of a run-down ranch style house with a 4-foot chain link fence rusting around the front yard. The dusty yard hosted a swing set, also rusty, though the support legs were set firmly in the ground with cement. The house itself was painted a sea-blue color that was now peeling and faded. Two of the four windows that faced the street were boarded and there was a paper tacked to the front door.

"Isn't this place condemned?" Mira asked.

"No," Richard said. "Abandoned, but not condemned. I stick a paper with some meaningless scratchings on

there from time to time so people would think that. The house is still solid, the locks work and it's quiet."

"Looks good," Rey said, appreciating the location.

"Is this where you lived before you were Taken?" asked Less as he got out of the Jeep to look around.

Richard paused, looking at Less, then nodded. He turned and pushed the gate open, leading the way up to the house. He knocked on the door, then unlocked it and let everyone in. Hamilton shot between Rey's legs, causing her to stumble to avoid stepping on him. He flicked a switch and lights flooded the room.

A woman with short, black hair and too-pale skin rose from a chair near a cheap kitchen table with metal legs. She was too pale but would have been attractive if not for the deep, dark circles under her eyes and the air of desperation that hung around her.

"Richard?" she said nervously.

"They're friends, Betty," he assured her. "This is Less, Mira and Rey."

Rey felt like her inner predator was dancing just beneath her skin. "Hello, Betty." Desperation was such a close cousin to fear, and it was an emotion she tasted often in the casino. She moved to one side, toward the nearest corner of the room, giving the others a bit more breathing room. The table and chairs took up most of the space in the room, leaving little to move around, and Rey didn't want to intentionally antagonize Betty. Not yet.

Betty had been looking at Richard, but his gaze went to Rey. Her eyes hardened to see what was in them. Her posture became rigid and hostile.

Mira breezed past Richard and Rey then, pulled out a chair and seated herself at the table, forcing Betty to break her stare, as well as interrupting Richard and Rey's line of sight long enough to reduce tensions. "So Betty." Her voice cut through any remaining building tensions as all were immediately entranced by the singing tones that underlaid her words. "Richard asked us to help you and we've decided that we will. Some of us have connections to use that might lead us to your missing... friend. But first we need to know who we are looking for and what she looks like." She glanced over her shoulder to her friends. "Does that about sum it up?"

Hamilton suddenly launched himself into Rey's arms, forcing her to catch him or be subjected to his claws when he tried to catch hold. He head-butted her cheek, purring. "Well, the bimbo does something right for a change," he said in a whisper. He referred to Mira's move to defuse building tension.

"And a short list of those who would have the most to gain by her disappearance," Rey added gently, stroking Hamilton as she spoke. "And the power to take her." There were other things she wanted to say, but that would only increase tensions again. As much as Rey wanted to poke at Betty's wounds with a very pointy stick, now was not the time.

Less once again produced his notepad. "And Caterina's position within the Barony of Shadows. Politically, socially. Any friends or associates? Her preferred hunting grounds?"

"Caterina was much favored by the Baron of Shadows, but she didn't get so much special treatment. The Baron is very even handed," Betty said. Her voice was a little hoarse. "Anyway, it wasn't any of them that killed Roger and Lisette and took Caterina. I know them all by sight. The one that took her was really tall and lanky, like a basketball player. He had black skin and a shaved head. When he broke into our place, he mowed through a bunch of guys and gals that Caterina like to keep around, like a gang. They tried to fight him, but... knives, bullets, everything just bounced off him, except for Lisette's claws. And he killed anyone in his way until he reached Caterina, including Lisette. He just reached out and snapped her neck." Betty

shuddered, reliving the moment, but it was a strange thing, half fear, half thrill.

"I jumped at his back when Caterina started fighting him, but he back-handed me and I lost consciousness. That was the last I saw of them until I woke up a while later. I tried to track them but I lost them in the tunnels. I went to the Baron and begged him, but I'm nobody. I tried to get someone to listen, to help me, but got nothing. Finally, one of the ghouls from the other vampires took pity on me and told me they'd heard the Baron talking about Caterina, that something had taken her into the Deep Caves and that it was forbidden to go down there. It's beyond the boundaries of the Baron's Domain..."

Richard filled in the rest. "Apparently Caterina didn't have close allies, not like your friends," he told Mira. "No motley or anything like that. But I haven't been able to get close to them to ask questions and find out if anyone else has been looking for her, or what's going on."

Betty added, "They are paranoid and private anyway. Caterina's disappearance seemed to make them more so, like they didn't want what happened to her to happen to them, too. But they didn't care so much that they'd go looking."

"What happens to you if we don't find Caterina?" Mira wanted to know.

Betty looked at her and said, "I need her. I need what she gives me, her love and will that I should live. Without it, I'll age fifty-eight years and likely die at the end of nine days."

"You mean Blood. You want vampire blood or you'll die."

Betty nodded. "But it's more than that. It takes more than just blood to sustain someone like me. She has to want it, want me. Without that..."

"Without it, again you die." Mira looked at her with pity. She couldn't help but wonder how close she'd come to becoming something like this poor woman.

"Was he a vampire," Rey asked, "or might he have been something else?"

"I don't know," Betty said. "He didn't drink anyone's blood if that's what you are asking."

Rey's head tipped slightly to one side as she looked at the blood slave curiously. "You couldn't tell?"

"How would I tell?" Betty snapped. "They don't wear signs around their necks."

"Hm," Rey said, and a ghost of a smile flirted with her lips for the briefest of moments. "True. It would certainly make things a lot easier if they did. But we're just trying to find out everything we can. The more knowledge we have, the better we might fare when we walk into whatever traps Caterina's kidnapper has laid." The Fairest's tone wasn't accusatory, but she was simply pointing out their difficulties facing them in trying to find and rescue the vampire.

Less perused his notes. "I assume Caterina was not the only vampire in the room. Do you have any idea why this person would want her so specifically that he would fight his way through the whole group to get to her? Also, is there any way into these Deep Caves without passing through the Barony?" He looked up at the rest of the group, but favoured Rey. "For that matter, has anyone heard anything about these Deep Caves before?"

She shook her head. "Nothing substantial."

Betty answered his comment. "Actually Caterina was the only vampire there. It was our place and she didn't share with other vampires. Not her space, anyway. I don't know why he took her, nor do I know where an

entrance to the Deep Caves is, or I'd have gone there."

"Something to ask our contacts, then." Rey said before turning her attention back to Betty. "Is Caterina the only vampire to have disappeared lately?"

"I don't know," she responded.

Less was sure it didn't have anything to do with the case at hand but his curiosity got the better of him. "Who was Lisette then? Why did she have claws?" He quickly tacked on another question that did have to do with the investigation, though it looked more and more like they'd need to speak with the Baron directly. "And you'd better tell us who this other vampire was. The one whose ghoul told you about the Deep Caves."

"Lisette served Caterina, like me. Caterina taught us some of her own powers so we could better serve her. Claws that cut steel like butter is just one of her many gifts," Betty said solemnly. "John's master is Lucas. He is Nosferatu and knows the deepest reaches of the Barony of Shadows. But he won't talk to the likes of me. I'm nobody without my master."

Rey hoped Mira was making note of the names for when she talked to Remy. If he didn't know them, he might know someone who did.

The phrase 'I'm nobody without my master' echoed in Less' mind. He wondered what had tempted Betty to make her dooming decision so many years ago. "I think that's about it." He turned to Richard. "We'll have to lean on our contacts and hope we can convince them to meet with us. It's clear that if they do act, it will be in the interests of Caterina. We don't have much to bargain with, but we'll do what we can."

Rey barely smothered a snort of laughter. Vampires, acting for the benefit of anyone other than themselves was a thought she found very amusing. Her face schooled back to calm indifference, she move to stand next to Richard just inside his circle of personal space. "I have someone I can call who might be able to help Betty deal with the waiting until Caterina is found." Or what to do if the vampire wasn't.

Mira listened, thinking that some of this was starting to make sense. She couldn't see the cautious, paranoid vampire kind making a move until they were certain it wasn't a trap. Meanwhile, why take on the extra burden of helping along a rival's servants? That would only expose you to an unnecessary risk. Mira internally shook her head. So they would let someone suffer and die in order to preserve their own hides. So the question was, why did Remy seem different? Why did Minerva seem to be nice to her? Perhaps not all vampires were cut from the same cloth. Maybe there were some willing to take a risk for another, if they thought it was worth it.

Betty had been watching Rey. "Unless they are a vampire willing to help, I'm not interested," Betty stated.

Richard said, "As you like. Betty..."

She held up her hands. "Stop Richard. None of this is your fault. You didn't have a choice. I didn't either. I just didn't know it then," she added bitterly.

Mira used sign to ask, "Less? How do you want to do this. Shall we go together as a group, or do you want us to divide?"

Less considered the question. Though he would appreciate the backup when dealing with Crystal, he wasn't sure the others would immediately understand his reasoning behind his source of bargaining power with the Barony. "Time is of the essence, here. I suggest we each try to make some headway with our individual contacts. Rey can see if there is any Sage knowledge concerning this situation. As soon as any of us hears anything, get in touch with the others and we can help follow up."

Mira dutifully agreed and the team began making plans to split up. Richard, having no contacts and likely to simply be in the way, would stay with Betty. When each member of the motley completed their tasks, they could regroup at the safe house.

Less took considerable pains and caution to contact Crystal. The vampire hadn't made it very easy. But, he finally managed to catch sight of her later in the night and convince her to meet with him in one of the empty apartments north of the west Mythic train station. It was actually not far from his own apartment, but of course she didn't need to know that.

The room was quiet at midnight. Having no furniture, Crystal perched on top of an old water heater, expectantly waiting for Less to explain why they were here tonight.

Less stood by the mantle. The vampire made him feel a bit queasy and he studied the dirt and debris on the painted shelf. He absent-mindedly picked at the peeling wallpaper as he spoke. "I am doing a favour for a friend," he started and immediately regretted it. "He wants to help a ghoul from the Barony. Her master, Caterina Lebedev, was taken by someone - something? - and brought into the Deep Caves. In order to save the ghoul, I need to find Caterina. To find Caterina, I need to find these Deep Caves. And so, I need an audience with the Baron, or at least with a Nosferatu named Lucas. Time is of the essence. The ghoul has only nine days before she will die."

Crystal cocked her head curiously. "Caterina's in the Deep Caves? I'd been wondering where she'd disappeared to. She does that sometimes, but never for more than a few nights that I know of." She tapped one fingernail on the metal of the water heater. "I might convince Lucas to speak with you. That won't be easy but he owes me a favor. I could call that in. Supposing of course, you could cover my loss." She smiled. "I might convince the Baron, but that would be very difficult, and very expensive."

"Do you know where the Deep Caves are?" asked Less. If she did, he could skip Lucas altogether.

She nodded. "I do, but getting there will take you through home turf of Lucas. He might not like me leading a bunch of strangers through his home without getting permission first either from him or from the Baron. The other thing is that I don't know anything about the caves themselves. Just where they begin. I believe the Baron might, though."

Less pursed his lips. Here was a difficult dilemma. Stick with Lucas or try for the Baron. What were the chances that whatever the Baron knew about the Caves, he learned from Lucas? "I don't suppose your favour to Lucas is worth him bringing what the Baron knows with him to our meeting?" he asked the grimy vampire.

Crystal pushed an errant lock of hair out of her eyes. "He's not supposed to know much about the Caves, since the Baron ruled no one was to go there. I doubt he'll get anything out of the Baron."

That struck Less as odd. "Why did the Baron do that?"

Crystal shrugged. "Everyone has a different idea as to why."

Less figured if Lucas lived at the entrance to the Caves, he wouldn't likely follow the Baron's rule to the letter. Knowledge was power, as he well knew. "I'll take my chances with Lucas," said Less at last. He stared out the dusty window. He could see one of the red train signal lights in the distance. "I have my usual goodwill payment for the Barony."

Crystal smiled. "I believe your gifts are becoming popular. The trade you asked for was non-damaging information, wasn't it? I think I might have something of interest."

Less was loathe to give up interesting information but there were more pressing things at hand. He sighed. "Would you accept this shipment as payment for your help with Lucas? I will endeavor to provide the Barony with a replacement gift in due time."

"Yes, of course," she said quickly. "Is there a number I can reach you when I get it set up with Lucas?"

He gave her the number at the payphone on the train station.

"I'll call you soon," she said.

Mira contacted Remy that night as well. Explaining on the phone that it had to do with "family" business was enough to clue him that she needed to talk about vampire affairs, something she knew he'd want to discuss in person rather than over methods of communication that could be intercepted or overheard.

Mira invited him to meet her at the apartment, where she assured him that whatever they discussed there would be magically protected. However, she was perfectly willing to go to him instead.

He chose to meet her at the apartment, and arrived a few minutes after she did, greeting her with a kiss on her hand.

The action always flooded Mira with the hurts of power and brought a smile to her lips.

"I am so sorry," she began, "to have interrupted your evening. This time I think it is one of your kindred that is in trouble."

"I see," Remy replied with a slight nod. "Who is it?"

"There is a woman named Caterina who serves the Baron of Shadows. She has been taken by a powerful man. Perhaps a creature, we don't know yet. It's her servant that has come to us. Other vampires of the Barony won't have anything to do with her. She says they worry her master will return and make her turn on anyone who tried to help her. They would rather let her die while they wait and see if Caterina is really gone or only lying in wait.

"I believe this servant, though. I think she speaks the truth, that something terrible has hunted a being of power."

"I have heard of Caterina," Remy replied with a nod. "She is powerful, powerful enough to have status within the Barony of Shadows and do it on her own merit. She has no coterie. She is alone. And the servant is right. There are very few who would risk taking her. But why have you come to me about this? The goings on in the Barony generally do not concern me."

"We want to save the servant and we think Caterina was taken to a place called the Deep Caves. But no one will talk to us either. I was wondering, hoping, you might know a contact, someone who'd let us help, show us where the Deep Caves are. I know you always told me to stay away from the dark places of the train system. So I thought you might know..."

"I'm afraid I cannot help you with that," Remy admitted. "The Barony is a group apart from Santa Fe, and they are very private, and there is very little love lost between both groups. Why is this woman important to you?"

"She isn't," Mira said. "But I feel badly for her. No one will help her. Before the vampire got her, she was belonged with someone, you know? She was married and had a life. It was all taken from her and she was turned into this blood-crazy... slave I guess. And now even her life is going to be taken from her, too. It's

just... sad. I don't think she deserved any of it. And the one who loved her? Her husband? He's still around. This is destroying him."

She finally looked up, glancing at his eyes for just a moment. She wasn't supposed to do that -- he'd warned her enough times, but she was trying to be sincere. He could see she meant it, that she actually felt something for someone outside her usual realm of self and immediate friends. It might have been something Xavier had done, a by-product of something else. It seemed more likely than the idea she was spontaneously developing compassion.

Remy sat quietly for a moment, watching Mira, before he spoke again. "I can see if there is some way I could help her, but I promise nothing. And if someone will help, a price will be needed to be paid. Taking another's ghoul, not knowing if their master is alive or not, is a dangerous risk."

Mira thought about it. She remembered the look on Betty's face, and the look on Richard's face. If she could get help for Betty, then maybe she could finally win Richard's trust. She had suspected that he hadn't much trust for her for some time, though she could never quite pin it down for sure. That made it worth it.

"If there is a price to be paid, I'll pay it," Mira said.

"Better wait to find out what the price might be before making such rash statements," Remy said with a little smile.

Mira smiled back. "I'd be more cautious but you spoil me with lavish gifts, generous aid, and rarely ask anything in return."

"I'm saving up all my favors for one big one," Remy replied easily, but his mood turned serious once more. "It costs me little to ask the questions, but to act on them could be very expensive."

"What kind of costs are we discussing," she asked.

"It would depend on how valuable they think their effort is. How much they value their time and safety, and how much they like or dislike the person asking. They might ask for a service in return, or an item or object. It's hard to tell."

"I'm certainly willing to negotiate," she said. Then she had an idea. "What if I was to share whatever I learned about the Deep Caves and the Barony with you? Would that be worth something?"

"It would," Remy said with a nod, "but I am not the one who would be dealing with the ghoul. You would still need to negotiate with them."

"Would you be willing to give me an opportunity to do so?" Mira asked.

Remy nodded.

"Do you have a time and place in mind?"

"I have to find out if the person is willing to even talk about it. When I do, I'll let you know." Remy shifted slightly in his chair, making himself more comfortable. "I can't guarantee a rapid response, either. But if Betty taken on, you're likely never going to see her again. Nor will your friend."

"If that's the way it has to be then I'll let Betty know first," Mira said. "I'll wait here near the phone for you to get back to me."

As Less requested, Rey contacted Lord Joshua to see if he may have heard about vampires going missing in the Mythic area.

After speaking with Lord Joshua, Rey contact Jesse and arranged for a meeting at Rey's home. It would provide the privacy she wanted to have for the conversation, and had the side benefit of Jesse and Hamilton meeting up again. The young woman showed up within an hour of Rey's call. She said she'd been running an errand for Lyla -- groceries for the pack and was on the way back. Stopping at Rey's was no trouble, she'd said.

"I appreciate your coming," Rey said after she put their drinks on the table. "I need your help. Information, actually. My friends and I find ourselves in position where we need to help a ghoul. Her master has disappeared, kidnapped actually. The woman is scared, on edge. I was hoping you might be able to tell me what I can do to help her, or how to deal with her should she snap and we need to protect ourselves."

"Snap? Is she... broken?" Jesse asked.

"It's not immediately obvious," Rey said, "but she's been enslaved for over 50 years. I'd be very surprised if she wasn't." She paused for a moment then continued. "And she really doesn't like me all that much. She was married to Richard, and wasn't too pleased to see he'd moved on after she abandoned him."

Jesse shuddered. "Fifty years is a long time to be addicted to vampire blood. To be willing to do anything for another taste of it." Jesse closed her eyes, old feelings washing over her again.

"I'm sorry, Jesse," Rey said, regretting bringing her friend into this. "Richard's been trying so hard to help her, for the woman she used to be, and she says she doesn't have much time left. If she doesn't reunite with her master and the master gives her the blood and wills her to live in just a little over a week, she'll die."

"Fifty years... she'll age and die then," Jesse said sadly. "I feel sorry for her, but I don't know what I can do. She needs a vampire to give her blood. She can't ever stop being a slave to them now, not if she wants to live."

"Any vampire's blood will work?"

"I don't know the magic of it, if it will keep her alive. If she says that it requires the will of the vampire who gives her the blood to stay alive, she could be right. A taste of vampire blood will temporarily curb the cravings, but as for extending her life I suppose it would be up to the vampire."

"It's better than nothing," Rey said, "or it might just make things worse." She closed her eyes and rubbed her forehead as if she were trying to ward off a headache. "I doubt I could even find a vampire willing to give me some of their blood to help her out, at least not without paying more than I would normally be willing to."

"Yeah," Jesse agreed. "To get them to do anything, there has to be something in it for them. Which brings to mind a question I've been puzzling over ever since I heard about the incident at Ottowi Pond."

"What's that?"

"Why did the vampires help at the pond? What was in it for them?"

"Because they have a... business arrangement you might say, with Mira, the woman that Pure pack was hunting," Rey explained. "They help each other out from time to time."

"Is she your friend?"

"She is," Rey replied with a nod.

"Do you really believe she's helping them so much they'd risk dying for her?" Jesse pressed.

"I can't say," Rey said, "but she is important to them, both as an ally and, in at least one case, as a friend. As much as a vampire can befriend anyone in any event."

Jesse snorted. "I think I need a drink."

Rey nudged the bottle in Jesse's direction with a wry smile. She splashed some of the red wine into her glass and then took a drink. She sighed.

"Well. I'm sure you warned her she was playing with things that are incredibly dangerous and it's probably too late in any case. If you go in just a little with them, you're in all the way. From the moment you learn one thing about them, your life is in their hands. One misstep and... oh hell it doesn't even take a misstep. A whim is all." Jesse shrugged. She was speaking of her own experience, of course, which Rey knew well enough. The girl shuddered. Reliving these old memories was hard on her.

"Well, there was a way out for me. I wasn't Ann-Marie's slave very long, though. For Betty, maybe there is a way for her to survive without being an addict and slave to one master or another but I don't know what it is."

"I didn't think there would be, but I had to ask. I'm sorry, Jesse," Rey said. "I know it's bringing up bad memories." Bad was likely an understatement, but Rey really did wish there was some way to have avoided the pain she was causing her friend.

"It's okay," Jesse assured her. "But I'm afraid I don't have any further contact with vampires at all. I wish I could be of more help."

"You provided me with info I didn't have before," Rey replied. "It may not be much, but you were the person I trust the most to tell me the facts."

She smiled. "Thanks, Rey."

"I hope one day I'll be able to help you out." Just behind Jesse, Rey saw Hamilton stroll out of the bathroom. "And there was another reason why I asked if you'd meet me here, rather than somewhere else." She tilted her head to one side, making it obvious she was looking at someone behind Jesse.

Jesse saw Hamilton, who was pretending that the world revolved around him and was therefore beneath his concern. He laid down in the middle of a trafficked area to clean his paws, forcing potential traffic to step around him.

Jesse turned back to Rey with a smile. "Is that your spirit fetch? I haven't seen him in forever."

"Yes, that's Hamilton." Rey could keep from smiling. "Hamilton, aren't you going to say hello?"

Hamilton of course, decided that it should be his decision if he wanted to. So he made a show of taking his time cleaning his paws, and then looked up, as if noticing Jesse and Rey for the first time. He then walked over, hopped up into Jesse's lap and spoke. "Hello, young lady. It has been some time, hasn't it?" he purred.

Rey bit back a chuckle, and poured herself a glug or two more of the wine and took a sip. She couldn't remember if Hamilton had ever spoken directly to Jesse before, so she watched her friend's face to see how she reacted.

Jesse blinked at Hamilton in astonishment.

"Cat got your tongue?" Hamilton asked innocently.

"He's learned a couple of new tricks since you saw him last," Rey offered, taking another sip of her wine. "He still likes being scratched in the usual places."

Jesse automatically started massaging the cat. "Life is full of surprises she remarked." She was smiling, having recovered from the surprise quickly.

"All we can hope is the good outweighs the bad," Rey added.

Beloved Lost and Found: The Deep Caves

Mira visited Rey after Remy had left and gave her an update. She didn't have anything as far as the Deep Caves; it didn't seem like Remy wanted to encourage her to go down there. But, she might be able to find help for Betty.

She did mention that if help could be found and Betty agreed to it, Rey and Richard might never see her again. Which didn't seem like much of a down side to Rey.

Less appeared at Rey's house as well. Crystal would call the station regarding a meet between he and Lucas so he didn't expect to be there much longer than to get updates.

Less scratched at his arm. His skin had been crawling ever since his meeting with Crystal. "I made contact with the Barony," he told them all. "I am trying to arrange for permission from the vampire whose territory contains the entrance to the Deep Caves."

"Lord Joshua didn't know anything of use, but he's asking his contacts," Rey said. "I asked my other contacts about anything we might be able to do to help Betty, but other than giving her some vampire blood to hold off the cravings, there's nothing else we can do." She looked between Less and Mira. "Betty is dangerous. Having been a slave to a vampire for so long, she's damaged, and in ways we've got no way of helping her. I think we need to make sure she and I are never left alone together. She knows Richard and I are together, and isn't pleased about it."

"Hopefully Remy will get back to me soon," Mira signed. "If I can manage to get something arranged for Betty to go into the service of another vampire, that issue will be over."

Less agreed. "She is an addict and desperate. There is no telling what she would do at this point." He checked his watch. "I should get back to the train station. I'm expecting my Barony contact to call. We'll probably have to enter through the tunnels anyway so do you all want to come with me?"

Mira signed, "I need to return to my apartment to wait for Remy's call, also. Then I might have a meeting after that. Why don't the two of you talk to the vampires. It might work out best for me to rejoin you once you've secured passage to the Deep Caves."

That was fine with Less. "I should stop by the Hollow on the way. I want to grab that net gun and the bottle token."

"What for?" Rey asked, thinking that there were a few things of her own she wanted to bring.

"We're going into caves that no one knows anything about from which came some unknown monster. I just don't want to wish I had something I left at home."

"Such as our own personal street doc," Mira put in. "Don't forget to grab Doctor Tom while you're there. I believe he said he would be working in his new, uh, surgical area at the Hollow's house."

Less confirmed this as a good idea with a point and nod to Mira. He moved to the Door but paused. Memories of the last time he passed through the Door and was diverted by the Ice Queen flooded back to him. He covered his hesitation by turning back to wait for Rey.

"Go ahead," Rey replied. "There's nothing I need from the Hollow."

The group split up then, with Mira catching a cab ride to her home and Less heading to the Hollow. Soon he returned with a net gun, the magic bottle, and Doctor Tom. The good doctor looked excited and was carrying black bag as an old-fashioned symbol of his trade.

After adding Rey back into his party, Less returned to the train station to await Crystal's call.

He didn't have long to wait. She soon called him to let him know the meeting had been arranged and that Lucas was available to come to his office if that was what he preferred.

Less decided the lost and found office was as good a place as any to meet an unknown monster from dark tunnels beneath his feet. He gave Crystal the information, hung up, and relayed the situation to Rey.

"Ready to meet some vampires from the Barony of Shadows?" he asked her.

Rey adjusted her jacket and nodded. "Let's go."

Less looked dubiously at Dr. Tom's eager face, then beckoned with his head. He led them to the office, unlocked it, and set about arranging for chairs for everyone.

At the expected time, there was a knock at the door. Less discovered a middle-aged hand wearing a winter hat and dark clothes slouched next to Crystal. The man immediately gave the impression of a feral predator. Everything and everyone his eyes touched was a potential threat or meal.

"Master Seleman," Crystal said, "this is Lucas. May we come in?"

The stories of vampires and being welcomed through a threshold stabbed at Less' brain and his eyes looked to Rey for advice. She gave him a slight nod.

They entered Less's office. Crystal, as was her habit, found a chair upon which to perch. Lucas slumped into another, glittering eyes poring over Less and Rey.

"It was very good of you to meet with us, Lucas." Less hesitated slightly. He was so used to using the titles of changeling society that it felt like an insult to omit one. "As I'm sure Crystal has mentioned, we are trying to help a friend of ours. To do this we need to try to rescue Caterina, who, apparently, was taken to the Deep Caves. I wish to ask permission for myself and my friends to cross your territories in order to reach the Caves' entrance."

Rey tamped down the urge to growl at Lucas, and quickly signed, "Never look a vampire directly in the eyes. It makes it easier to control you" in the Glymjack sign language for both Less' and Doctor Tom's benefit.

Lucas looked around the room.

"Okay," he said with a shrug.

Less did his best not to look directly at Lucas' eyes. He could never really be sure. "Crystal has said she can guide us to the entrance. Do you know anything about the Caves that we should be aware of?"

"They were mostly quiet until about a month ago," Lucas said. "Now there are strange sounds coming from them. Nasty sounds."

Less considered what a vampire who lived in an underground tunnel would find nasty. "You've never investigated?"

He glanced at Crystal, then formed his words carefully. "I have my domain and there I rule at the pleasure of my liege, the Baron of Shadows. The Deep Caves lie beyond my domain," he said. "I have nothing to gain by disobeying my liege just to satisfy my curiosity.

"If I did investigate, it would have been some time ago and I'm sure I would have nothing of interest to you."

His implication by mention of domain seemed to indicate he expected to have some kind of authority in that area. That meant anyone else might be subject to his rules while passing through it.

"Fair enough," said Less. He stood. "I fear Caterina and our friend's safety diminishes every minute. I suggest we go to the Caves immediately."

"But before we set foot in your domain, Lucas," Rey said, speaking aloud for the first time. "What rules must we abide by within it?"

"Whatever happens there is my business. You don't interfere."

"Just keep us away from your business," said Less. "All we want is the entrance to the Deep Caves."

"You want a guide then. To get to the Deep Caves?" Lucas shrugged. "Crystal can do it." He gave her a feral smile.

Crystal looked at him suspiciously, but nodded. "Yeah sure."

Less signed to Rey, "Can we get in touch with Mira?"

"We'll have to call her," Rey signed back, "and then wait for her to get here from wherever she happens to be."

Less couldn't recall if Mira even had a phone. Sometimes she did, sometimes she didn't. He addressed Lucas. "We have to wait for another friend of ours. Can you give us some sort of passport in case we are challenged as we cross your territory?"

Lucas nodded toward Crystal. "She'll be your passport for this one time. You have a one-night pass." He looked idly around the room. "We done?"

Less looked around at the others. When they didn't have anything to add he nodded to the vampire.

Lucas stood and left, leaving Crystal with Rey and Less.

"Um. That was... brief," Crystal remarked. "By the way, I'm Crystal as if you hadn't already heard. You are?"

she asked of Rey.

"Rey," the Fairest replied politely.

"And this is Tom," said Less gruffly. "But don't push it, Crystal. We appreciate your being our guide but we're not happy that we have to enter the Barony of Shadows and work with vampires. We're just trying to help a friend." The means justify the end once again.

She rolled her eyes. "Have to work with vampires, huh? Nice. I wonder how many of your friends would want to work with you if they knew what you were really like." She switched her attention to Doctor Tom. "So Tom. What are you supposed to be? Some kind of doctor?"

"Yes," Tom agreed readily. "Some kind of doctor. May I have a sample of your blood?"

"May I have a sample of yours?"

"Touché," Tom admonished.

Crystal switched back to Less. "So when is your friend going to show up?"

Meanwhile, Mira had arrived at her apartment and waited for Remy's call. Amber had come home by then and they chatted a while until the phone rang. Mira picked it up and knew it was Remy before he spoke.

"Good evening once more," Remy said solicitously. "I have the information you asked for."

"That's great news," Mira answered. "Where do you need me to be?"

"Can you be in the parking lot of Corazon in half an hour?"

"Yes, of course. Shall I be looking for someone in particular?"

"They'll find you," Remy replied enigmatically. "Good luck with your task, Mira."

"I appreciate this, Remy."

After they hung up, Mira grabbed a coat, told Amber she was heading to Corazan's and then left to walk down to the bar.

She was there ten minutes early and spent it standing under the parking lot lamp post surrounded by a yellow circle of light. It ruined night sight, but she'd rather have the safety it provided.

A limo pulled up on the street near Mira, and the rear passenger window lowered. "Good evening, Mira." To her surprise, she recognized Minerva's voice.

Mira smiled and approached the vehicle. "Good to see you!"

"Why don't you come inside." The door opened and Mira could see Minerva sitting alone in the back of the limo.

Mira did, scooting inside properly. Once the door was shut and they began driving, Mira asked, "So it's you who is interested in helping Betty?"

Minerva leaned in and gave Mira a friendly kiss on the cheek before answering her question. "I don't know

if I can, but I will attempt it."

Mira smiled as the little shiver of power gave her a thrill. "Minerva, you've done so much for me. Is there anything I can do for you?"

"Bring me back some souvenirs of your trip into the Deep Caves," the vampire replied with a little smile. "Some rocks from different places, and trophies from anything you defeat. Nothing huge, just a bone, a tooth, some hair, or the like."

Mira looked at Minerva thoughtfully. "Is that all you want?"

"Don't tell her you've found someone who will take her in yet, not until you know if Caterina is returning," Minerva said. "If she is not, you may tell Betty there is someone who will take her in, but do not tell her - or anyone else - who it is. And you will make sure she is delivered to me at the location I arrange, when you return."

Mira nodded. "I will. Is there another number I should call when I get back?"

Minerva gave Mira a number, and a reminder to be careful.

As the car came to a stop to let her out, Mira kissed Minerva on the cheek. "I think you are really sweet."

She got out at a street corner, found a pay phone in a bar and called Rey to find out where to go next. After Rey told her, she took a cab over to the Lost and Found office.

Mira walked in about twenty minutes after Lucas left. After introductions were made, the group was ready for the deep caves. They departed and took the train to the downtown station. This was located deep underground near the tall buildings at the city's center. Their underground trek began in maintenance tunnels that connected to deep storm sewers. Some of these were very old and the sides were cracked.

A fissure large enough to draw the nearby tunnels marked the place where the underground caverns really began. Ancient and carved by both nature and hand, they were like a maze that brought back nightmares of the Hedge. Crystal's flashlight remained their only source of light for the journey and although they saw no one else, they saw evidence of habitation. Piles of old blankets and the occasional fire pit surrounded by empty tins of food betrayed the presence of people that hide at the first sign of light.

Rey kept a sharp eye out for movement in the shadows. The people who lived down here were homeless, and could be dangerous, attacking to protect their space or caught up in the throes of mental illness.

Less hovered close behind Mira. Crystal disturbed him deeply and she knew things about him that he didn't want to reach Mira and Rey. Despite the stale air he could smell her shampoo and it calmed him somewhat. "Are we at the Deep Caves yet?" he asked. He tried to speak softly but the absence of light and the echoing tunnels made his words loud to the ears.

"Almost," Crystal said. "This is Lucas' domain." She looked around nervously. "There should be more people around."

They walked a while longer. It could have been a half mile, but it was hard to tell. They'd made so many turns that they couldn't tell if they were under a city or a mountain at this point. Finally, they stopped at what looked like a dead-end tunnel with a massive crack at the end. It seemed even blacker in there than the caves around them, as if the beam of a flashlight couldn't penetrate it.

"This is as far as I go," Crystal said into the heavy air. It took a moment to register what made it feel so heavy,

so dead. Then one realized there was no echo. Their guide backed away warily, her eyes on the crack. "Good luck in there. I probably won't be here when you get back, so I hope you have flashlights and plenty of batteries. If you go dark in there, you'll never get out."

Mira didn't like this at all and was regretting having made the promise to help Betty. Dying down here for an old flame of a guy that hated her was not her idea of a good death.

Rey looked at Less but remained silent. His behavior was different, not his usual self. Now, however, was not the time to be discussing it. She took out her flashlight and, after checking to make sure it worked, she made sure her pen light and laser pointer (otherwise known as a cat toy) were still in her pocket.

Less turned on Crystal. "Lucas made you our passport! I don't expect you to follow us into the Deep Caves but if you abandon us down here you will never get your payment."

She sighed. "I can't stay here," she said looking at her watch. "It will be dawn soon. I barely have time to return to my own haven. I'll be helpless and useless to you anyway during the day. But very well. I'll return for you tomorrow. You have a watch? Ten o'clock tomorrow night. Don't be late; I won't stick around long. Not with some vampire-napping thing running around down here."

This deal just sounded worse and worse to Mira's ears. She frowned into the dark but kept her worries to herself.

Less let her go. "Look, if necessary I can open a Door to my Hollow from here. With Mira's control over fire, we shouldn't have to worry too much about light. This is a chance not only to find Caterina and help Betty, but to learn something about these caves. The vampires don't seem to know anything, I'd never heard of them, even the Sages have nothing. Are you ready?"

"Need to be careful with fire," Rey said absently as she looked back over her shoulder in the direction of the retreating Crystal. "It can freak a vampire out something awful." She adjusted her grip on her flashlight. "Let's get this over with."

That seemed like a good thing to Less. He retrieved the small light he used in his own tunnels. "You're probably the best able to track Caterina's kidnapper, Rey. I'll follow behind and keep a close watch for other dangers. Mira, stay on your guard. There could be anything at all concealed in those shadows."

"Difficult to track if I don't know what to look for," Rey replied "or what scent to seek out."

"It mowed through a pack of ghouls before coming here. You might find blood, or footprints. A hint of Caterina's perfume?" suggested Less as he flashed his light across the stony ceiling.

"It's been two weeks," Rey reminded him. "Any scent trail left behind is likely long gone. I just want to be perfectly clear. There is no guarantee any trail I do pick up will help us find Crystal, or even the person who took her."

Rey looks at Doctor Tom. "Stay close to Mira. Do you know how to use a gun?" she asks him.

"Er, no. I've seen it many times on TV, however. There is something called a Safety, yes? That sounds like a part I'd like to identify," he said as he fastened a doctor's lamp to his head. Normally used to shed light on a wound or other part of a patient, it served him now as a miner's headlamp.

Rey nodded. She'd been in the same situation, before Ironclaw had taught her to shoot. She turned away from the rest of the group, facing away from them and toward the deeper darkness of the Deep Caves and called upon the Contract of the Beast's Keen Senses to see what she could sniff.

Less was in the same boat as Dr. Tom when it came to firearms, though he avoided movies that featured them. His uneasiness with them caused him to try to avoid the war as a boy, and indirectly had led him straight into the arms of the Ice Queen. The thought of anyone shooting a bullet in the pitch dark, with it ricocheting off every surface, filled him with dread. "It's probably best we leave the pistol training for a safer time," said Less as he waited for Rey to lead the way.

"Human blood and lizards," Rey said, her voice having deepened and gotten a bit gruff and rumbly. "This way." She moved down the tunnel, following the scents.

The group followed her down the tunnels. Many of them ended in cracks too narrow to safely follow, but Rey's nose kept her on the path that always led someplace they could move through without too much difficulty. Without that trail, though, it quickly became evident they'd be lost in short order.

It was rough going. Here and there was evidence of enough blood to stain fingers and clothes. It was cool and damp in places, causing the group to shiver endlessly and miserably.

Finally the motley heard and saw signs of occupation. A kind of slithery, shuffling sound came from up ahead as well as the sound of water dripping. A slight glow lit the tunnel before them.

Less doused his light and touched Rey lightly to get her attention. "Should I scout ahead?" he signed. "I'll stay out of sight and won't go far."

Rey's answer was to put her hand on his back and gently push him in the direction of the light. She changed her stance so that she could spring into action quickly.

Less wrapped the mantle of Winter around him as he walked softly forward. He hugged the side of the tunnel, wishing momentarily that he had brought the magic boots from the dead man they came across in the Hedge. He found them too taxing, though, the magic tired him out. He edged forward, trying to get a glimpse of where the light was coming from.

Okies. Lemme put on my creepy narrator hat. And so it goes:

The way wound forward another fifty yards or so, by Less's best guess, before the source of the light revealed itself. There was a huge cavern that swept up into the dark. He couldn't see a ceiling but cascades of stalactites poured down from the ceiling to meet the thorny teeth of stalagmite mates. It was nearly a maze all lit up with radiant blue lichen moss that had a distinctly otherworldly feel and would surely make the most vibrantly alive person look like a corpse.

The walls of the maze-like natural structure, being made of minerals, were awesome to behold. Pale white formations resembling waterfalls glistened near the walls of the great cavern. Other forms glittered a thousand different colors as if they were liquid frozen in time. Red and blue stalactites stabbed at the stoney floor or splashed into pools of stagnant water.

But the natural beauty of the formations was marred by the sweetly rotting and coppery scent of blood. Less's first realization of what was so horribly wrong with the cavern was when he spotted the half-eaten body of a homeless man skewered upon a stalagmite rising from the floor. The body dripped ten feet off the floor.

Less swallowed against a dry throat and backed silently away. Once he was in sight of the motley, he relayed his reconnaissance by sign language.

"What now?" Rey signed back.

"Let's investigate the cavern as a group. No sign of Caterina yet but there are many places to hide in there. I

wouldn't want to walk through without backup close at hand."

Rey didn't point out that, in all likelihood, Caterina was dead, either killed by whoever had taken her, or dead from lack of feeding, as given the amount of blood all around, it likely wasn't going to the vampire. Instead, she simply nodded and moved forward, trying to be stealthy.

Mira and Doctor Tom joined them and the group crept down the winding hall and into the cavern. When they got there, Mira paused, awed by the formation as well as disgusted by the blood and the corpse impaled on the stalagmite. The group moved on.

It took some investigation to begin to find their way through the maze-like mineral structures, but the blue lichen actually helped. The patterns it formed seemed unique on the rock formations they passed, ensuring they didn't retrace their own steps too much.

At last they found themselves in what must be the heart of the cavern. Peeking around a massive stalagmite, they spotted another body. Her hands had been tied together and she was hung from a metal hook embedded into a stalactite. Long strips of meat were missing from one thigh and a portion of her ribs was missing. The stink of death was overwhelming.

Doctor Tom frowned. Mira fell to her knees and vomited.

The dead man on the stalagmite was bad enough, but seeing a human woman dangling from a hook was too much. He felt faint and bile rose in his throat. He forced himself to swallow it back down but coughed in disgust. Colour drained from his face.

"Oh look," Rey signed. "We've found someone's larder. That wouldn't be Caterina. I doubt a vampire would make good eating."

On cue, the corpse let out a wet gasp and jerked, causing Rey to jump about a foot.

"Oh, hell!" gasped Less. "Help me get her down. How bad is it Tom?"

"Well, Less," he said, "judging by the smell, putrefaction has set in. I'd say she was a goner, but that would be un-doctorlike." He stroked his jaw calmly. "We're going to need a step ladder to get her down. Something that can easily reach ten... feet..." It occurred to him that whatever put her up there would be big. Really big. He looked around nervously.

"What do you plan to do if you get her down?" Rey asked. "There's nothing we can do right here, right now, to save her. Any time we spend helping her will increase our chances of being discovered."

"Because she's human and she's alive!" whispered Less emphatically. "She shouldn't be left to die on a meat hook." He looked up at her and then nervously around the cave. He was stricken by Rey's true words. He might be able to get her down, but he didn't want to jeopardize the motley.

Mira approached the woman hanging there and looked at her. When she looked back at Less, her eyes were troubled. "You and Tom are both right. She's dead and she still lives. She's a vampire. I think we found Caterina."

Then a slithery sound echoed around them, bouncing off the mineral formations so they couldn't determine a source for the sound. The sound faded into the sharp notes of boot heels on stone that got louder and then stopped.

A whispered voice surrounded them. "Uninvited guests. How very rare."

Less immediately drew upon his faerie magic to protect himself. Mists of shifting air swirled about his body and parts of him seemed to drift in and out of existence. He backed up to a stalagmite and gripped his umbrella defensively.

Rey went into a slight defensive crouch and looked around, trying to spot the being that had spoken. She hated echoey caves.

Less wasn't sure what to do. He didn't want to be a guest like Caterina was a guest, but whatever it was had initiated conversation. "We didn't know about these caves until a woman went missing," He said aloud, hoping he wasn't making a mistake.

His eyes flicked to Caterina and back. Less and his motley were suddenly struck by a flickering image of a huge, scaled beast with green eyes in place of the man. It's black, horned head was as long as Less was tall and it swept low to take a good look. Then the impression of the beast was gone and it was only a man.

"It is mine. I am the dragon of the earth, changelings, the dragon of death. It belongs to me as do all those who walk in death." An unhealthy gleam was in that man's eye. Surely what he spoke of was madness! "I merely claimed it as my own, as it is well within my right to do. Why should this concern you?"

The image of the dragon rocked Less back onto his heels. Many of his mouths gibbered quietly and his eyes rolled in their sockets, not wanting to look in its direction. He managed to control at least one set of lips. "Because the vampires walk among the living. They form connections, they have lovers. A living woman will die without Caterina and so we came looking for her."

While Less talked, Rey observed the creature they were talking to. How did one of the fae end up down here in the caverns, why was it here, and more importantly, what manner of creature was it?

"And now that you are here, and know she is mine, do you persist in your... quest?" the man wondered.

If it was up to Rey, she'd have apologized for intruding and leave as quickly as she could, but it wasn't her decision so she waited to see how Less would respond.

The motley was here as a favour to Richard. He certainly didn't owe any allegiance to Caterina or the creepy vampires of the Barony of Shadows. Rey should have been the one present to act as Richard's proxy here but it was clear her hatred for vampires and her jealousy of Betty were winning the war. He signed to the others, "Any input on this? Do we have a better claim to justify trying to save the vampire - and Betty?"

Mira spoke aloud but in Glymjack Cant and ignored the dragon's curious stares. "You mean other than the fact Betty is a human being regardless of what drug she was addicted to -- against her will? And the fact this creature murdered humans like her to get to the vampire here? And that Caterina was kidnapped against her will and taken beyond a maze just like we were? And someone should stand up for victims like this?"

She shook her head. "Nope. Can't think of a thing."

Looking at her friend's faces, she knew she was being needlessly harsh. She sighed. "Listen. You are right. For what Caterina did to Betty, maybe she deserves death and worse. And maybe this guy actually has the claim he says he does. I doubt it, but whatever. Think about this: He's throwing titles around like he owns the place. Where the hell did he come from? What's to stop him from claiming dominion over anything that creeps around in the dark? Like... like Sissy? Okay bad example. What about Worm and other people of ours? What protects us from him?"

"Nothing," Rey replied aloud in Cant. "Except for whatever rules he has decided to live by." She looked at Less, and a slight sneer flashed over her face before she turned to face the so-called dragon of death. "By what name shall we call you?" she asked in normal speech.

"I try not to get too friendly with potential food," he said. "You may call me The Dragon. I will call you, Changelings."

Ugh. I forgot my mouse at my parents' place. So awkward...

"You need to learn more respect for your food, Dragon" said Less. "We learned that the hard way with Mad Cow Disease. Caterina may be a vampire, but you have kidnapped her against her will. Our kind does not take well to such abuse. We will persist in our quest!"

He looked amused. "A quest it is then! I wonder if you can prepared to bargain? You see, from my point of view I kidnapped nothing. Kidnapping is taking what is not yours, but she is clearly dead and therefore mine already. Why, she is a food source that keeps on giving for as long as I provide her with fresh blood! A true treat, I promise!"

Steam rolled off his shoulders when a drip landed. "Yet perhaps we might bargain. I see you brought such a pretty siren with you. I like her voice. Would you might offer to leave her here with me to sing? I might be persuaded to give up my food for that."

"She is not for sale," Mira said in English.

"So you say," he said. "But it is up to him, isn't it?" He nodded to Less.

Mira blinked, confused. "What?"

"My companions are not my slaves," said Less. "I do not command them." This self-titled Dragon must have lost his grip on reality living in these caves. "By what authority do you claim dominion over the dead? I have never heard of such a decree."

"By right of domain. In the earth, I reign supreme. The dead lay in the earth. At least, the ones that matter to me do. Some of the living descend into the earth as well. I take those I catch in my domain and that makes them mine."

"That's just the right of conquest! Taking spoils you plunder away from others!"

"Ah, your song is lovely, even when outraged," the Dragon said. "But you have it right. I feel I have authority here and over any vampires I catch. Therefore, I will do it and when I catch them, they are mine."

"Now. Will we bargain? Or shall I have dinner?"

Rey's stomach lurched and roiled. "What do we have to bargain with?" she asked in Glymjack Cant. "His reasoning is logical, and for him to give up... his food source, we'll have to give him something just as valuable."

"Yeah, I don't see negotiation to be much of an option here," said Less in Cant. Something occurred to him and he turned back to The Dragon. "How long have you lived in these caves? What did you eat before you took this vampire?"

He man called The Dragon thought about that. "Forty three days. What I ate before that depended on whatever thing I caught."

Less found this line of inquiry very interesting and he pressed for more. "How did you find these caves? Where did you come from 43 days ago?"

"From the other side of the Maze, of course," he said. "I would tell you more, but you are... guests? here in

my home. You should provide me with a gift first. Tell me, where are your homes?"

"Gifts?" Mira said in Glymjack. "Information! That's the most valuable gift of all. If that's what we can trade, then we might have all we need with us. We should be careful here."

"Are you invoking the rules of hospitality?" Rey asked their "host" suddenly, her voice taking on the tones her motley mates recognized as her getting ready to negotiate mode.

"Hospitality? Ah, a quaint idea that your kind dreamed up for places in which your kind gathers, a mutually agreed-upon set of rules that prevents one changeling from causing harm upon another except in an agreed-upon duel. There are two problems with that," the Dragon said. "First, there is no mark indicating my home is a gathering place for your kind. Second, I am in no way a changeling. Nor was I ever."

"Changelings are not the only ones who have rules of hospitality," Rey replied. "And if you are not a Changeling, then what manner of being are you?" She casually touched Mira's arm, and with a few finger flicks in their motley's secret sign language, she asked if Mira knew what the Dragon was.

"A dragon," he said simply.

Mira shook her head slightly and signed back, "If he's what he says he is, then he's fae. Maybe with a capital F, And maybe not."

"I figure 'Beyond the Maze' must be a euphemism for the Hedge," signed Less. "It seems he's only been in these caves and the vampire tunnels above. In offering up information about our homes, I think we can be pretty vague and general. Even telling him there is a city above the tunnels is probably worth something to him."

"I think you are right," signed Mira. "This maze might mean the Hedge and if he's from beyond that... then we have a problem bigger than even one giant dragon. Maybe we can trade for information like you say."

Rey nodded, and turned her full attention back to the Dragon. "You wished to know where my home is. It is on the surface, near the forest."

"Which forest?" it asked.

Rey looked at Mira, looking for an indication giving this information was part of a fair trade for the information they'd already received about the Dragon's home. The nymph inclined her head.

"I don't know if it has a name, but it is above us, in Mythic City," Rey replied.

"Would it be near Iron Mountain?" he asked.

Rey nodded.

"Ah. Not so far from my brother, then," the Dragon mused. "Now, shall we bargain for the vampire?"

Rey looked at Less, to see if he had anything to say before she began the negotiations.

Less took a deep breath and signed, "This is what we came here for..."

"Let us begin," Rey said aloud with a nod. Had someone told her this morning that she'd be negotiating to save a vampire's life, she'd have laughed in the person's face. Yet here she was.

Less was cold with worry. He could barely look at the Dragon and he didn't want to distract Rey. He

wanted to do something for Caterina but felt helpless there, too. He met Tom's eyes, though he was never sure if people ever recognized he was making eye contact, and gave him some encouraging smiles. He gravitated to Mira's side and was surprised to feel warmth emanating from her. The image of her as Ice Princess was strongly embedded in his thoughts for her, he sometimes forgot she was flesh and blood. He put a friendly arm around her shoulders and gave her a light one-armed hug.

Mira was internally a little surprised, but she was always a tactile person. She showed him a little smile, then returned her attention to the deadly serious bargaining they were about to undertake.

"In return for the vampire," the Dragon said, "you'll give me... ?"

"Tom," signed Less. "Can you tell what he wants?" For himself, Less scrutinized the Dragon with his Contracts of Fleeting Winter to see if he was sorrowful about anything.

Tom signed back with sad look, "Sorry, not my thing." But Less got a positive hit. Or at least, his contract worked. But unfortunately, the Dragon was not currently feeling any sorrow for Less to suss out.

Mira got the hint and tried some things, too. She blinked and rapidly signed, "He fears being sent back through something called the Black Gates of Arcadia. Do you think that's a literal thing?"

"If anything can be literal when the Hedge is concerned," replied Less in Glymjack sign. "Fears can be good leverage, but promising anything with regards to not putting him back through the gates might seriously backfire on us!"

"Still doesn't help us," Rey signed back. "What can we offer that would take the place of an unending food source?"

Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day. Give a dragon a vampire and he will feed himself for a lifetime. "To teach him new skills so he can exist comfortably this side of the Maze." Less suddenly held up his finger to wait, "Or, he could have this magic bottle. If he asks it to protect him, it will ensure that he is never hungry again!"

Mira blinked. She signed, "Less, that's ... that's a lie! It's ruthless. Cold. And brilliant." She smiled.

Rey nodded and turned back to the Dragon. "In exchange for the vampire we offer to teach you new skills so you can exist comfortably on this side of the Maze," she says, "or you can have this magic bottle." She did the Vanna-White-wave at the bottle Less was holding. "If you ask it to protect you, it will ensure you will never be hungry again."

The Dragon came closer for a good look and eyed it suspiciously. He looked at Rey, then back at the wondrous bottle. His stomach growled.

The Black Dragon of Earth was, in its true form a huge creature the size of a small house. Its claws could rend steel. Its teeth could crush granite. I could make the Earth do its will and wore rocky slabs for armor to prove it, when he chose. He was absolutely master of his den and a mere thought could shift his home like a moving maze, trapping his prey eternally. He was nearly two thousand years old.

And in all that time, he rarely had an opportunity to interact with a changeling, except to terrify it or eat it. Never had it attempted... negotiation.

With a triumphant nod and a cunning smile, the Dragon declared, "It's a deal!" He greedily snatched up the amber demijohn and with a gesture, the stone lowered the vampire to the floor. With a chuckle, the dragon retreated to the heart of his home, leaving the motley alone with Caterina.

Rey watched the Dragon go, then turned to Less and the others. "Let us make haste," she said, "and get out of this place."

"Lesson number one..." murmured Less as he stared into the pitch blackness of the cave. Then, he turned to help Tom with Caterina.

Less and Tom carried Caterina back through the tunnels. Rey scouted ahead while Mira kept an eye behind for the Dragon. Caterina was heavier than she looked, and Less had an awkward grip in order to keep her teeth as far away as his neck as possible. She reeked of death.

After what felt like they were digging their way out of their own graves, they found their way back to where Crystal had left them in the subway tunnels on the edge of the Baron's territories.

While they waited for their guide to bring them through vampire territory, Mira signed, "Do you think that's the last we'll hear of the dragon?"

"Possibly not," Rey signed. "And he does have a brother, don't forget. Who knows what he is and what he's capable of."

"I'm more immediately worried about these Black Gates of Arcadia," replied Less. "What are they? And who opened them to let the Dragon through? And how could such a creature exist in the Mortal world?"

"I think that that when dealing with any far we should expect exceptions and loopholes to what we think are the rules. If we even really know what the rules are," Mira suggested. She signed, "These Black Gates sound like an entrance to an Arcadian Realm to me. If they are 'open' then it may be that the raw power of that Arcadian Realm is leaking through the Hedge. Maybe even into our world here. I think that the local Hedge, at least, has just become far more dangerous than it has before."

Her thoughts drifted back to the Brain Bugs incident and her face pinched in worry.

"We need to inform the other Regents," Rey signed, keeping an eye on the vampire.

"Indeed," signed Less. "We've waited long enough for our guide. I'll open a Door to my Hollow up at the junction over there. I'll signal when it's ready." With that he marched off into the gloom, fumbling for the candle stubs in his pocket to perform the ritual.

Mira paced. "What if his brother is another dragon? What if he has more than one sibling?"

Caterina, laid on the ground for the moment, seemed deep asleep -- only natural since it was currently daytime.

The nymph paused to consider the gnawed-upon vampire. "And how are we going to deal with her? We can't take her to the Hollow during the day without exposing her to daylight."

"The Door Less is creating will take us into his Hollow," Rey replied. "I'm sure he's got some blankets or a something we can cover her up with. Or maybe even a body bag. It'd certainly make it easier to carry her."

With the ritual complete, Less stood and looked with satisfaction that the branch tunnel now led directly into his own cavernous network. "He beckoned the motley to come."

"You planning on narrating the rest of the day?" Rey asked with a little smile, which turned into a grimace as she picked up Caterina by her feet to help carry the vampire into the Hollow.

The group continued into Less's network within the Hedge. By the time they reached a point close to the

Motley Hollow all were definitely feeling sore feet and exhaustion set in.

Not having a body bag handy, the motley had to be creative in wrapping the unconscious vampire to secure her from daylight, and then took her through. It was very hard to be certain of the time now that they were in the Hedge and Mira was getting nervous. She did not want Caterina waking up there in her present starved state and she said so.

"She is going to need blood -- assuming she can awaken. If she can't then I haven't the slightest idea what we are going to do with her. I do not want her in this Hollow for one moment longer than absolutely necessary."

"I don't suppose you've got some blood stashed away somewhere for emergencies?" Rey asked Less.

Less gave her a strange look and glanced away. Any blood he might have was already spoken for. "You mean that I'm not currently using? Dr. Tom might be more likely to keep such things." He looked up at the weird Hedge sky. "Let's just get her to Richard's house. Betty might be able to round up enough blood to bring her master around."

"What, put her in the trunk of my car or something?" Rey asked. Her car would end up reeking for weeks.

Less shrugged. "Sure. Don't you have a big SUV or something?"

Mira smiled. "You are the only one of us with a car, Rey."

"Then you guys will be getting rid of the stink she'll leave behind in the trunk of my Fusion." Rey grimaced but she knew it was up to her to transport the body. The next question was should they call ahead or just show up with the partially butchered vampire at Richard's.

"Rey, you know there is no smell, except what you imagine," Mira pointed out. "Despite the appearance of a corpse, she is not really decaying. If she was then we would know for certain that she is dead, not ... undead. All I smell is old blood and that is faint."

She stopped and then addressed both Less and Rey. "Listen, maybe I can handle this part. Leave the vampire with me and I'll deal with her because on second thought, I think it's a bad idea to let a badly injured and possibly starved vampire wake up near any source of blood. Betty and Richard and anyone else could be killed. Let me deal with this. You two need to start looking into what these "Black Gates of Arcadia" are."

"When are we going to tell Richard we've got her?" Rey asked.

"I don't see any reason to wait," said Less but he was disturbed by what Mira has told them. "What are you going to do with Caterina," he asked her. "Can't we just lock her in a box or freeze her in a block of ice or something and feed her blood through a tube?"

"I'm not sure that won't damage her further," Mira said, switching to sign. "And it would look pretty bad if we ended up dusting her by accident." She stole a term from Buffy the Vampire Slayer, but it got the idea across. "What I would like to do is turn her over to her kind -- someone I trust to handle it in a way that will divert questions away from us as changelings."

Less nodded. "That makes sense. I just hope we don't start some kind of diplomatic incident amongst the vampires. It's clear that there are several factions that rival for power in Mythic. It would be hard of the mortals if that heated up."

Rey looked down at her phone. She didn't relish the conversation with Richard. "Mira, if you're going to make arrangements for Caterina's care - and you don't need my car - I can go get Richard and Betty, or just

Betty, and meet you somewhere. Less, you could get a start on informing the other Regents. And don't forget to tell them there's at least two beings like the Dragon in Mythic. He said he had a brother."

"No problem," affirmed Less.

"What would you like me to do?" asked Doctor Tom.

Rey knew exactly what she'd like Doctor Tom to do, but instead gave a more responsible answer. "Maybe you could help Mira?" She looked at Less.

"You would certainly be wanted if Caterina wakes up or if you can ensure she stays dormant," said Less. "Otherwise, Betty is the most likely person who will need your services right now."

"Maybe we should talk about that," Mira signed. "She'll want to see Caterina right away. It might be easiest for me to secure Caterina before she's told. Then you'll be able to answer whether it's possible to see Caterina or not, or even if we can tell her Caterina is alive. If we have to tell her that Caterina is dead, I don't think it should come from you, Rey. You've been antagonistic toward her already; she'll react to it poorly coming from you, even if you're able to tone down your hostility."

Rey couldn't help but chuckle. "I can control my temper," she said with a smile, "but you're likely right. I really don't want to be the one to tell her, or be alone with her for any reason. Even if she can't sprout claws like Lisette did, I don't want to get into a fight with her."

"Alright. We should deal with Caterina first, then," said Less. "Once you're done that, give the news to Richard and he can tell Betty. While you're doing that, I'll get word to the kings and queens about the Gates."

Rey shook her head. "The phone call had better be from someone else. Even if the info comes from me but told to her by Richard, it'll be suspect."

"Fine. Mira or Tom can make the call. Let me know how it goes. I'm heading up to Iron Mountain."

"Why not you?" Rey asked. "It won't take more than a minute or two of your time."

"Sure, I can do it if you want. Just phone me when Caterina is safely secured and I'll let Richard know."

Rey nodded, then walked over to stand next to Doctor Tom. In a low, soft voice, she said to him "It probably would not be a good idea for you to get samples of a vampire's blood and flesh."

He looked at her in surprise, then said, "Why not? The Dragon certainly did."

"Well, yes," Rey admitted, "but he was eating them. Not studying them. Vampires really do love their secrets. Blood is a source of power for them, and so it is valuable."

"Ah. Well if it is secrecy that concerns you, then rest assured that anything I might discover will never see the light of day, so to speak."

Mira groaned at the terrible joke, but he looked serious.

"Knowledge is power," Rey said, "and given how often we are coming into contact with vampires, anything you might learn would be of a great help to us. I personally couldn't care less about a vampire's secrecy, but it wouldn't do for others to know what we've discovered, unless necessary."

He winked at her. "I shall be discrete," he promised.

Less didn't want to get in the middle of that, so he bid farewell and headed off to Iron Mountain to get in touch with the crowns of the Duchy.

"Mira," Rey signed, "does our Court have an archive or library we can access for research?"

"In theory," Mira supposed. "But nothing really worth anything. Valuable information is a highly prized commodity. You'd be better off seeking information from those knowledgeable about whatever you are interested in and making a deal with them. After all, if everything was shared openly, there wouldn't be much call for your own noble order of specialist experts."

Rey gave Mira a little smile. "True." Rey's own areas of expertise were rather esoteric, and she had yet to have someone come to her seeking information. "I thought it might be a place to start. I'll give Lord Joshua a call and see if he can send me in the right direction."

Beloved Lost and Found: Wrapup

Less was able to contact the other regents via their preferred channels regarding the presence of a fae creature within the bounds of the Duchy. Veridia further mentioned she would begin looking into broadening the Duchy's presence in the neighboring Hedge so that perhaps the freehold might stay a step ahead of these things instead of a step behind. The Storm King took the news in stride as he usually did; with a pledge to defend the duchy should any threat arise from below.

Less took the opportunity to remind Veridia that he had a few very capable agents keeping an eye on the Hedge for such threats and yet they still seemed to get through. With more funding for additional agents and informers he could tighten the net, and if she was considering colonization he could provide valuable intelligence for those settlers.

But Ishtar seemed interested in details and invited him for tea in the Spring gardens of the Desert Duchy's grand hollow in Iron Mountain. She was curious as to how he encountered the creature, what it was, and why it was here. As the reigning monarch now, it was felt to her make certain the Duchy was safe.

He accepted Ishtar's invitation for tea.

Comfortably seated in the lush garden, he fell into an easy conversation with the monarch. She was easy to talk to. "I confess I do not know much about this creature. It told me it was a dragon - and it certainly gave the impression of power and had mastery of the contracts of earth, but I cannot confirm any of its claims. I came across it while performing a favour for Richard, Veridia's Paladin. It was a negotiation with the vampires that live in the subway tunnels - and below. My dealings with it were brief and I was anxious to be away from there, though I hope to send an expedition to check on its movements. Two things of importance I learned from it: that it came to the mortal world through the Black Gates of Arcadia, and that it has a brother that lives near Iron Mountain."

That brought a sharp, worried look from the Queen of Spring. "That doesn't sound good. Do you have any guess as to whether it might be in the Hedge or the mortal world?"

Less was confused. "Are you asking about dragons or gates? The dragon did mention he was from beyond the Maze, which sounded like a place in the Hedge or the Hedge itself."

"I'm sorry, that was clear as mud. I meant this creature's brother," she explained. "Either way its bad news, but it might help us find the thing more quickly if we had an idea which side of the Hedge it was hiding in."

The Virgin Mother

Richard's Safe House

Rey caressed the side of Richard's face, trailing her fingers along his jaw. They had been lying together quietly, enjoying the simple pleasure of their bodies touching. Her fingers moved up to the top of his head and onto his massive horns. "Looks like I marked you," she said, and rubbed at a shallow scratch. "My thorns left scratches behind."

He frowned a little and looked at the scratch, but decided that it was a small price to pay to keep Rey in his life. "So I see," he said.

"I'm sorry. They didn't want to let go. I didn't want to let go." She continued to touch the horn, stroking it in an almost loving fashion, and a strange, contemplative look covered her face. "Do you remember the first time we spoke?"

"Yes," he said. "You seemed very proper and formal to me." It was an odd thing to say coming from him, since he was the one who'd acted that way.

Her hand stilled and she met his gaze, a little wrinkle formed between her arched brows. "I did? Really?"

"A real lady," he said with a nod.

"I did it for you," Rey replied. "You were so courteous, so polite. Chivalrous. It impressed me that someone in this day and age would still act that way. I wanted to show you through my own actions how much I respected that. I deliberately took my time getting up, to give you the opportunity to behave as you wished." A little smile danced on her lips. "And to distract me from your horns. From the very first moment I saw you, I wanted to reach out and touch them." She laughed softly in self-amusement. "Wanting to touch the rest of you happened when I heard you speak for the first time."

He chuckled. "I didn't know anyone liked my voice. Thank you." He went on. "Honestly, though I have the better deal in this relationship. There could not be a more beautiful person in the whole Duchy, both inside and out."

"Well, I'm certain there are people who would dispute that." Rey turned in his arms and slid one of her legs over his, making it easier to see his face. "You're not so bad yourself, you know."

"I'm glad you think so," he said.

"Any woman who doesn't is an idiot," Rey replied immediately. "For which I am grateful. I'm afraid I have something of a temper, and don't appreciate it when someone tries to poach the man I love." She reached up and touched his face and smiled. "I count myself the luckiest of women to have found you." Her nose wrinkled. "That sounds so hokey, doesn't it."

He hugged her in his arms. "Not right now it doesn't."

Rey smiled and snuggled closer. "Your looks aren't the only reason I decided to take a chance with you. Not just your voice either. Did you know that when I talk to you on the phone, I can almost hear what you sound like in person, feel it's resonance in me. It's like a great big long distance hug."

"Am I so soft and fuzzy?" he asked.

"You're one of the fiercest warriors I have ever had the honor to watch and fight alongside. A true terror to behold, and I hope never to have to stand against you. But even that's not the reason." Rey continued, realizing she needed to put this into words, that it was time to tell him.

"I chose you because I could see the future I'd always wanted. Someone who would always be with me, even if he couldn't physically be there. Someone for whom I'd be a partner, not someone lower down in the pack. Someone whose both sides knew he wanted me." Richard could feel her smile against his chest. "Lyla once told me that sometimes, the man a woman needs is the one who brings us peace. Make no mistake, you can drive me wild beyond all reason, but you also bring me such peace. You soothe my mind and quiet the growling in my soul."

"You are such a poet, Rey," he said softly. "I don't have such a knack. But I can tell you that you make me feel comfortable with myself, and that thinking of you and being with you brings me great pleasure. I wouldn't choose another."

"So, you don't mind if I drive you a little bit crazy now and then?" She asked, both seriously and in jest.

"How do you mean?"

"Oh, I do things that anger you," Rey said, "disappear for days without so much as a phone call, and I'd love to drive you as insane with need as you did me not all that long ago." The last she said with an unrepentant grin.

"I think I could live with that kind of 'insanity'," he remarked with a smile of his own.

"Good." She slipped out of his arms, slipped a leg all the way over him so she sat astride him, though using him more as a chair than in an effort to arouse him. "I need to call Mira and let her know we're both okay, and that I probably won't be home until morning."

And then we need to talk a little business, both Duchy and personal. Or would you rather wait to talk shop until the morning?"

"Shop talk would spoil the mood," Richard decided. "Can it wait until morning?"

"Most of It can wait until morning," Rey agreed. "I wanted to tell you I'm going to take an honest to goodness vacation in a couple weeks, and wondered if you would like to come with? I'm going to my cabin, and I was hoping to show it to you. But if we go there, it will be a true vacation, as we'll be off the grid. There's no cell phone reception at all, and no motor vehicles are permitted beyond the visitor center. And it'd be a couple hours walk from where we'd be arriving there, through wilderness."

"I think I'd like that," Richard said. "But I have to clear it Veridia first. She'll need to make arrangements for someone else to cover my usual duties when I'm gone."

"No problem. I need to give my minions at the casino some warning." She liked to joke about being a casino evil overlord, especially since a number of the employees actively feared her. A small group of them were stealing from the casino, and the first inkling they had someone was onto them was when she'd showed up in the break room with officers from the Mythic PD to escort them off the premises.

"All you'd need to bring some clothes, anything special you might like to snack on, and a backpack, if you've got one." Rey wriggled off him and grinned. "Now, don't lose that train of thought." Her movements had started his body to stir. "I'll be back in a minute." She grabbed her cell phone and called Mira at her home. No one answered, but it was very late and none of the motley had sleep to speak of in the past couple days, so she left a message.

Rey put her phone on the table and turned to Richard. "So, where were we?" she asked with a smile.

Mira's Apartment

When Less ventured downstairs in the morning, he discovered that Mira had returned. She and Amber were seated at the table munching on some crunchy bowls of cereal. When she spotted Less, she waved her spoon at him, swallowed, then said, "*Good morning, Less!*" Amber greeted him as well.

"*We have cereal in the cupboard, tea in the pot, and I brought home a copy of the morning paper if you like,*" she told Less.

"That's very considerate of you," said Less, picking up the paper and shuffling through the sections. "Good morning, Amber." He glanced briefly at the front page as he unfolded the

Classifieds. His informers used the pages to communicate with him and he checked it for coded messages. "How is Rey doing?" he asked.

"I dozed off on her couch but she called and I woke when she left the message. It sounds like they'd pounded out their issues and were okay now."

Amber choked on her cereal.

Mira peered at Less's paper. *"Anything good happen for a change?"*

In point of fact, Less had noticed that lately there had been a spike in violent, domestic crime. Today there was a story in which a cab driver seemed to go crazy. After a hair-raising high-speed run through the city that led to a police chase, the cabbie had crashed into a residence, taken a gun out and then shot his passengers and himself.

There were no coded messages in the classifieds today, however.

"Really?" said Less to Mira. "I was expecting more drama." To Amber he said, "No, apparently nothing good. Domestic crime is up - maybe Richard isn't doing so well after all - and a road-rage incident with a taxi ended with a murder-suicide." He scanned back through the details trying to determine if it was the same man who had ferried Betty to Minerva the night before. The picture didn't match their driver, but Less thought the cab company was the same.

"Ugh," said Amber. "I hate the news. They never report the nice stuff."

"There is some nice things in the entertainment section," Mira pointed out. *"And they have sections for engagement and wedding announcements, and sometimes even good weather reports."*

"Pfah," Amber said. "You can't get all rational when complaining about stuff. Takes the fun out of it. What have you guys been up to lately anyway? People have been trying to get a hold of you, Mira."

"What people?"

"Well for one, there was the lady you brought over that one time, to do that chanting thing for the apartment."

"Aura. And set up wards to protect us."

"Yeah, whatever. Anyway she's been looking for you."

Mira pursed her lips. A meeting with her was likely to be very, very expensive. She'd have to pay that bill sooner or later, but she'd rather later. *"What did you tell her?"*

"That you were out with Drake. I thought you were! But then he called so I guess you weren't."

Less' eyes snapped over to watch Mira's reaction. He assumed Drake had called while they were hunting Caterina but something about Mira made him wonder. It reminded him that he hadn't managed to catch up with Clare since being interrupted at the Spring Welcome party. "Rey, Mira and I were doing a favour for Richard," he told Amber.

A smile had flickered on Mira's lips when Drake was mentioned.

"Oh," said Amber. "Well, I hope no one got hurt. You guys are always getting involved in things that get you hurt."

"You know that our world is dangerous, Amber."

"I know you can't help it. I just worry, that's all."

"What have you been doing lately?" Mira asked her.

"Aw. Well, I had a pretty big crush on Carson. He's so sexy!"

"I know..." Mira said, but Amber was still talking.

"But he's not as into me as I was him. I got him in hot water with his girlfriend. I swear I didn't know at the time! He made me explain and fix things between him and Marie. I was so embarrassed I thought I would die." Amber slurped down the last of the milk in her bowl. "So new rule! No more crushes. Ever. That's humiliating."

"That's a very healthy attitude, Amber. I'm sure you'll find someone nice." Less still had one or two eyes on the paper. "What are you up to today, Mira?"

"I would like to find a waterproof phone with texting. Tonight I need to go to work. Short shift, just seven to ten, but I'll need the cash."

"Lofty goals," commented Less. "I need to head back to Mythic to take care of business but I could pick you up a phone in the city if you'd rather hang out with Amber for the day."

Mira was surprised. *"Really? You don't have to do that. I have no idea how much that might cost..."*

"It's no trouble. I'll arrange for them to bill you. No skin off my nose."

"Oh hey. I should just give you some money." She went to a cupboard and pulled out a pink panda cookie jar, then pulled out a wad of ones and fives she'd collected from waitressing. She brought it over and handed the \$53 to Less. *"Just a pay as you go phone is fine. Thanks for doing this!"*

Less didn't protest. He took the money and said, "Not a problem. I'll see you later."

"Yes, see you in a while," Mira confirmed.

In the elevator down to the lobby Less took Mira's blue silk scarf out of his pocket. He had taken it from Mira's bedroom the night before and now he admired it and smoothed out some of the wrinkles. 'This was not a crush, as Amber put it', he told himself. Mira had the Ice Queen inside her and that made it different. Quite different.

He first went to the Hedge Gate near Mira's building. His first intention was to take the Trod back to Mythic but when he got there the reality (or was it fantasy?) of the Black Gates made him hesitate. He decided to take the bus.

The ride over was long, but interesting. The bus made multiple stops and a wide variety of people entered and exited throughout the trip.

There was an incident, however. Midway through the trip a middle-aged woman in a long coat entered the bus. She found a seat next to a young man and he immediately began making obviously unwanted advances. She reacted unexpectedly, retrieving a metal bar from her purse that fit in her fist and punched in the face. His nose was shattered and there was a scuffle.

Other people on the bus stepped in and pulled her off the young man who exited the bus the moment the driver stopped. The woman calmed down and the bus ride continued. She left several stops later, but as she stepped out the door, Less could have sworn he saw a small head poke out of the purse, glance around evily and grin, then disappear back into the purse. It happened so fast that when he blinked, Less could not be certain he really saw it, or if he'd dreamed it.

Less rushed to the other side of the bus to get a better view of the woman. As the bus pulled away, he stared at her through the dingy windows, trying to will the little goblin to show itself one more time. A building obscured the view and Less moodily hung on the overhead handrail. *Hobkin in the city!* It isn't just dragons slipping through the Gates. He couldn't wait to arrange a meeting with Clare. He had to risk a telephone call.

The woman had worn a wedding ring and although mature, she'd had a pretty face and her hair featured rich, brown curls. It was easy to see why the young man had hit on her so crudely. Although she wore a rather drab grey long coat, her over-sized purse was black and quite distinctive. Less was sure he would recognize her if he saw her again.

Claire answered his call. She normally spoke to him using his title, but she must have been in the presence of mortals because she answered, "Yes, Mr. Seleman?"

"I'm on the Sante Fe to Mythic bus. I need to meet with you as soon as I arrive. Can you be at the station?"

"Yes sir. I'll head there at once."

For the rest of the ride he was hyper-vigilant for hyper-emotional mortal behaviour. The man on the bus had received an over-reaction to his overly lustful behaviour. It seemed likely that the spike in violence in the city was an overdose of anger. Since emotions were a hob's stock and trade, just as they were with changelings, he had no doubt they were behind this. Word had to be getting out in the Hedge and so Clare was the one who would hear about it. The Gates might be in a maze of mine tunnels but they had to also exist on the Hedge side as well.

The rest of the bus ride was peaceful. When he stepped off at the station, Claire was there waiting for him in a grey hoodie and sweat pants. She stuck her hands in her pockets against the cold air.

"Sire?" she said once Less had moved away from the other departing passengers and was out of earshot of mortals. "What's wrong?"

"There's something wrong in the Hedge, Dub-Dee. I've learned that something called the Black Gates of Arcadia have opened and its letting Hedge-Creatures into the mortal world. I've met up with a dragon, and just now on the bus I saw some kind of goblin in a woman's purse. I think they might be causing mortal emotions to boil over in the city. Have you heard of anything in the Hedge about it?"

"Nothing overt, sire. Just rumors of movement, but nothing came of it." She frowned, then rasped, "It may be they are coming straight to the world, bypassing the Hedge. I wonder why."

"Because they can?" mused Less as he thought about where they might be coming from. "Something about these Gates allow these creatures to exist in Reality. If they are feeding off mortal emotions, then Mythic would be like some kind of smorgasbord."

"I've heard of some hobs that can use existing Gateways to leave the Hedge, do their mischief and then return. These are often the source of fairy tales and trickster spirits. Could it be there is more than one thing happening here?" Claire wondered.

"Yes, I suppose so, but that would be a very large coincidence. I'll get Worm on to tracking down the woman I saw with the purse-hob. Keep your eyes and ears open for these Black Gates. And be careful." After a moment's mental debate he changed the subject. "I'm also wondering if you managed any success in that last task I set for you - the one to find some distant Hedge trouble suitable for a Summer warrior's quest?"

She nodded. "I have reports of a pack of briar wolves roaming the border along southern reaches of the Duchy's territory in the Hedge. I was able to find evidence of their presence -- some skills, feces and the like. Would they suffice?"

Less would have preferred something even more remote, but it was good enough for now. "Yes, good work, Clare. I'm sorry I had to pull you away from what you were doing."

"Not at all sire," she whispered. She didn't leave, however. She had something else on her mind. "Sire, I have been thinking about my partial failure to infiltrate the witch's coven due to the fact I am not mortal. I believe I have located a mortal candidate I might use as a spy that will work for us. Are you still interested in gathering information about their activities?"

"It was hardly a failure, Clare. But, I am always interested in having independent confirmation of information. It is of lesser importance than these Black Gates, at this point. Who are we talking about?"

"Someone new. I noticed her during my own investigation. She's the sort of person who desperately wants to be part of something, and I detect a glimmer of real talent. However, she had a sister that was victimized by a cult and so she is motivated to act as a watchdog or infiltrator. I believe she will be easy to recruit and be a willing spy."

"Excellent! Go ahead and lay the ground work."

Claire was pleased he liked her idea. She bowed her head to him, then did as he bade.

As Clare glided off, Less moved in the opposite direction. He called Worm as he walked through the bus station. "I need some eyes on a woman. She got off the Sante Fe-to-Mythic bus at Gerald street. She is middle-aged, pretty, brown hair in curls, wedding band. Wearing long grey coat with large, black purse. Not only did she have a metal bar in that purse which she used to bash a young guy who got off at Hawks street with a broken nose, but there was a small hob in the purse. I think it caused the fight and it's friends are probably responsible for other acts of emotional boil-over. Let me know when you've spotted her - or the guy with the broken nose."

"On it, boss!" Worm confirmed.

When Rey was awake enough to speak coherently in the morning, she called Less' cell phone

He answered it while on the bus from Sante Fe to Mythic City.

"Good morning, Les," Rey said, her voice soft. "I have some information for you, about the Black Gates."

"Okay, great. What have you learned?"

"Nothing so much useful as how to close it," Rey replied, "but just a confirmation of the dangers. The longer the Gates stay open, the closer Arcadia will come to this world. Things for mortals will be getting worse and worse, and the dragon and his brother might not be the worst to have come through, or yet to come. That Gate is the entrance to some Keeper's realm. Whoever has the key, controls the gates.

"The Magister of Nightmares is searching the Hedge in and around the Duchy, looking for traces of the Gates. If she finds something, we'll be told."

"Something that Ishtar said to me the other day makes me think that the other dragon might be in the mines under Iron Mountain. It may be that the Gates are there, too."

"What did she say?"

"Just that the mines were a maze of tunnels. Remember how the dragon said he was from 'beyond the maze'? I thought he was talking about the Hedge - which might still be true - but if the Gates were at the bottom of the mines then he would have passed through that maze to get to the Deep Caves below the subway."

"Perhaps," Rey agreed, "but it would be dangerous to assume that they are in a fixed location. With enough power, anything that can become a Door can be made to be connected to anywhere in the Hedge or Arcadia. I think one thing we also need to find out whose realm it is beyond the Black Gates."

"That would be nice," admitted Less. "Ishtar also said there is something called *Eochair Dubh*, or Black Key. A sorceress is needed to see it. Nothing else is known about it."

"Good thing, then, that we have Mira." Rey paused for a moment. "Did the transfer of Betty to her new master go okay?"

"As far as we know it did. We brought her to the meeting point and she got into a limo. I didn't actually see Minerva or anything that followed."

"I suppose that's the best we can hope for."

"Yes. I wonder what use she will be for Minerva? She does have a lot of knowledge about the Barony, but so does Caterina who now seems to be in Remy's care. I'd like to know what game he's playing."

"Does it really matter?" Rey asked. "The more you get involved with vampires, the more you learn their secrets, the deeper the whole you dig for yourself. They're like cold sores. Just when you think you've gotten rid of one, it rears its ugly head once more. They never completely go away." She made a strangled little sound, then coughed once. "Pardon me."

"Exactly. Remy's activities and ours are intimately linked. I'd like to know when and

where that sore will pop its head up next."

"Then you need to ask Mira," Rey replied. "She is bound in a pledge to them, and would likely know what they are up to."

"Yeah, I probably will once the stuff with these Gates settles down a bit. What's our next move?"

"Find the key. If we find the Gate, then that's good too, because we may be able to set up some kind of watch or surveillance on it." Rey paused again for a moment. "In the meantime, I'll try and figure out how to use the key to close the Gates."

"Sounds good. I'll keep you posted. Oh, I should go - some woman is beating the hell out of a guy who was hitting on her."

"Be careful!"

Ouch time

Worm called Less back an hour later.

"I think I found her, sire. This is... not good."

Then it was even worse than he thought. "Tell me," he said.

"Well, it seems she went into a grocery store and got into a fight with another shopper. No one is sure what the argument was about, but they are saying the woman attacked an old man, then cut her own throat with a paring knife. I'm not sure that was it, exactly, though. I can't get close, but what was left of the man... no house wife is capable of that. It's like he was torn to pieces and there are vines all over the tomato section. The mortals seem to ignore that fact."

"The Mask is alive and well." Less tried to guess the hob's motivations but the alien creatures were hard to predict. "Good work, Worm. I'm on my way over. I want to see it for myself. Let's keep watch for similar activity in the city."

Less stepped onto a city bus headed in the direction of the market. When he got there, the police had taped up the area and they were just zipping a body bag up, but Less caught glimpse of the dead woman's face. He was sure it was the same woman from the bus ride. Only lots more dead.

Worm was standing at the end of an alley, keeping a surreptitious eye on things.

"Any sign of hobs?" asked Less.

Worm shook her head. "No, boss. But this was pretty much over since I got here."

"I'm going in for a closer look." Winter's mantle would probably keep him from being noticed but police officers were pretty picky about who entered and left their crime scenes. He called upon the fae contract and winked out of sight.

The first thing he heard as he got closer was a detective talking to the first officer on the scene, asking where the woman's identification was. The officer replied they didn't find any, no purse, no wallet, nothing. The detective muttered this was just getting better since there wasn't anything they could declare as a definite murder weapon.

Less proceeded inside the grocery store. The woman definitely had a purse, so what happened to it? And the hob that was hiding in it? He started at the tomatoes, hoping to find some sign that the Mask was hiding from the mortal investigators.

The area was covered in dead, desiccated vines. It looked to Less like they'd sprouted from the tomato stems. Some of the vines still dripped blood.

A young woman, probably still in her teens, was shakily telling a detective what she saw. She was wrapped in a blanket and sitting while a med tech looked her over. They seemed to be treating her as if she was in shock. The detective clearly didn't believe her when she told her wild tale of tomatoes sprouting vines that attacked a victim with whom Less's mystery woman had been arguing. The detective perked up, though, when she mentioned that when it was over, an old woman snatched up a black purse and exited the store quickly.

The description the girl gave mentioned a bent, grey-haired old lady who hobbled along on a cane. But after she picked up the purse, she moved like she didn't really need that cane anymore. The detective seemed to lose interest again at mention of that, treating her like she'd lost her mind and giving her his card for when she could think clearly again.

'*Bent, grey-haired old lady.*' In changeling society that was a bit like saying 'Caucasian male, 20-40 years old, medium build with dark hair.' Still, that purse clearly was important. He hurried back to the store entrance, stooped over so he could check under the produce counters for a discarded cane. He paced up one side of the block, then the other looking for any sign of this new quarry, but unfortunately whoever she was, she hadn't stuck around.

Still invisible, Less kept away from the other people milling around and called Worm. "Apparently an old woman with a cane grabbed the purse and ran nimbly off. Get our eyes looking for this old woman or the big black bag."

After hanging up, he went back to the scene. He would follow the eye witness home. The fact that she saw through the Mask made her his only lead, and possibly a target. He at

least wanted to know her address. After, he could call Ishtar and ask her about the tomato plants. It seemed like something she might know more about, maybe giving him a direction to start looking in.

As Less watched, the hapless teenager, in sticking with her story, managed only to win herself an overnight stay at the hospital. At the detective's urging, the medical technicians at the scene convinced her that she could be suffering severe and real shock from having to witness such a horrific murder. While bodies were being loaded into a hearse, she climbed into the ambulance.

Less decided to go along for the ride to the hospital. He climbed in behind the paramedics and simply stood bracing himself by the doors. The ride to the hospital allowed him to collect his thoughts. He needed to get word to the Crowns about this new threat. Summer would jump at the chance to stomp some hobs and he needed to add to the Bleak Seal's eyes on the street. But what were these purse-hobs trying to achieve? The incident with the taxi driver had ended with death, as had this one at the grocery store, ultimately. But not on the bus. Was that just due to the lack of tomatoes? He doubted it. Grocery stores and parks would be chaos by now and what kind of plants would be involved in a taxi? He needed more information.

When they arrived at the hospital, he jumped out ahead of the medical technicians as the doors were pulled open from outside. He followed along and waited patiently as the girl was admitted, jotting down her particulars in his notebook. Jocelyn, 16, lives with her parents (both of them!) in Parkview on the west side, across the river bed. While he waited for the parents to be contacted for insurance details and for a room to be assigned, he called Ishtar's hotline.

It took a minute to be put through to the Ishtar, but he recognized her voice the moment she came on the line. "Another personal call from the Winter King," Ishtar said over the phone. "Does fortune smile on me, or do you bring ill news?"

"It is I who basks in the warmth and beauty of Spring," said Less playfully. "But I must deliver a warning. There are hobs running loose in the city. Several mortals, at least, are dead because of them. The hobs are causing mortal emotions to explode, typically into violence. I have just left a scene where tomato vines were animated to slice a man up. Since plants are a passion for you, I thought you might know the type of hob we're dealing with?"

"Any number of hobs might know a Turn or two that would give them such powers. But hobs? Are you certain? I thought you were looking for something else, something... Arcadian."

"Well, I say hob but it's just a way to talk about the small goblin creature I saw in the purse a mortal carried. I think they are but a symptom of the Gates of Arcadia being open."

"I was thinking about what we'd discussed together about the Others," she said in a tone

that made her seem far away. "The way they apply rules to themselves in order to take on form, to define themselves is fascinating. The Others are like gods, you know, but represent pure chaos instead of creation. Without description and definition, they have unlimited power but no way in which to exert it. The more they are defined, the more power they can exert and the more power they can wrest from the elements of creation -- and yet at the same time they become more easily understood, if not fully comprehended."

She took on a more focused tone, her voice firm. "Few changelings have the intelligence to try to understand this fact. I once spoke to the Rose Council of this very thing but I could see they thought my words were madness. They could not understand that what we knew as the Goblin King was but one facet of the Other that used that title. The title gave him form, Mr. Seleman. But that was not his only name. Not his only title. He is also a sword, a beast, and a location.

"You do understand what I'm saying, don't you, Winter King?"

"I think so...in a way," he said. "It is possible that an Other in its formless, unimaginable, true existence is coming through the Gate. Its power is grounding out on anything convenient, like lightning strikes. Strong mortal emotions or a pile of fresh vegetables could act as a lightning rod, briefly focusing the power into something real. Perhaps the hob I saw was simply a coincidence or an opportunist looking to capitalize on the results of the lightning strike. Or perhaps it is how the emotional powers are materialized - the literal monkey on the back." Less had no idea if he was even close. "Whatever the truth, the purse seems to be important. For all I know it is the Gate, or the Key, or a piece of solidified Other, but I've got people looking for it. It was stolen away by a wizened, yet sprightly, old woman with a cane."

Ishtar seized on that information. "A Key? What Key? You mean this Black Gate has a Key? Mr. Seleman, this is very bad. I wish you had told me this before! That Key could be the source of this trouble -- and a lot more to come."

Less was thinking more about what the true existence of the Others meant about his Keeper. He was devoted to the Ice Queen but this was only a temporary mask that the being chose to wear on occasion. It rocked him, and yet he felt a thrill that the shard that resided in Mira was a constant. His Ice Queen existed unchanged within his motley mate. "It is the *Eochair Dubh*," confirmed Less. Ishtar herself had translated the phrase. "I have only just realized that something known as the Black Key might be related to the Black Gates. But we have only the mention of the existence of this key. There is nothing that suggests where it is or what it might be, though I hope Mira can help identify it with her magical sight."

"Of course," Ishtar agreed. "I'd forgotten completely about that. She made a thoughtful sound. "So, the sorceress can see it somehow, for what it is. In that case there might be another who can also sense this Key."

"Oh?" Less didn't much like this getting beyond his motley and out of his sphere of influence. "One of your worshippers?"

"No, Less. The one who taught Mira her skill in sorcery. The Queen of Autumn."

"Of course," said Less nodding. He had known that but had unwisely discounted the Crowns as active participants in this matter - especially unwise considering his own activities. "I'll be sure to ask Veridia to keep an eye out for the Key."

"Yes, that's best coming from you. She'd be suspicious of anything I might bring up with her."

Less checked his notebook. "Thank you for your time, Ishtar. I need to check in on a mortal at the hospital to follow up a lead. If you get any information concerning the Gates or the Key, or the old woman with the black purse, let me know immediately."

"Of course," Ishtar confirmed.

When Less found the girl again, a nurse had just left the room and she was sitting back on the bed holding a little cotton swab over the place on her arm where the nurse had pricked her with a needle.

Needle-pricks was another hair-raising event for changelings. At least it hadn't been a spindle. Less took off his hat and nodded politely to the girl. "Jocelyn, my name is Les. I understand you witnessed some horrific things today."

She looked at him calmly. "Yes. I saw a woman get murdered right in front of me. I'm probably in shock. Have we met?" The way she was looking at him assured him she could not see his true nature; his fae mien was in tact.

"We have not been formally introduced but I was at the scene when you were talking to the police. They were rather dismissive of your story but I am very interested in the truth. Can you tell me, again, exactly how the woman was murdered, and about the old woman who stole the black purse?"

"You're not some doctor whose going to lock me up for telling crazy stories are you?"

"No. I just want to know what you saw."

"Okay. Well, I was standing at the melons when this woman starts yelling at someone for taking 'her' tomatoes. Then the tomatoes starting growing vines! The vines stabbed the victim to death and ripped her to pieces while I was standing there. I couldn't turn my eyes away, even though I wanted to so bad! Then the crazy lady sort of blinked, picked up one of those plastic signs showing sale prices, and cut her own throat. It was over so fast. I couldn't even believe. Then this little old lady with one of those four-footed cane things hobbled over, picked up that purse and took off. It was so weird and horrible."

Less wondered if the sedative she had been given was making her so amenable, and

where he could get some. "Have you ever seen anything like this before? Not people dying, but strange things like the tomatoes coming alive. Did you notice anything specific about the purse? Or anything distinguishing about the old woman?"

"No, I've never seen anything like it," Jocelyn replied. "Not outside the movies. The purse looked ordinary to me, and so did the old woman until she took off running after picking up the purse. It was surreal. The police say I was in shock and my mind was probably playing tricks on me."

"Yes, probably," said Less. "Afterwards, when the police were taking your statement and didn't believe you, had the tomato vines returned to normal?"

Jo thought about that. "I... didn't notice. I guess I was pretty upset." The nurse had given her good drugs -- the trauma seemed distant, as if it happened to someone else. "Is my mom here yet? She said she was coming."

It seemed that Jocelyn could not see through the Mask. The power that activated the vines must have temporarily burned away the Mask at the time of activation but quickly recovered. The girl was probably not in any danger from being a witness but he produced a card with his number on it. "I'm sure she'll be along any minute now. I'll bet you'll be up and about in not time, but please call me if you see anything else strange."

He left the hospital discouraged. Things would get much worse if he couldn't find the Key and he was running out of leads. On his way to get Mira's new cell phone, he decided it was best to call Veridia to ask her to watch for the Black Key.

He was able to get through as far as Richard, but he reported that Veridia was off on business in the Hedge. He'd transmit to her that the Winter King needed to speak with her as soon as she returned.

Less began his errand to get a cell phone for Mira. He stopped first at his Hollow to pick up some documents he had been working on and to change. He stood in front of an old broken mirror and wrapped Mira's blue scarf around his neck, using its power to shift into her features. He could not match Mira's usual style in fashion and was forced to mix and match with the fashion flotsam that had accumulated over the years. He started with some ragged black leggings and slipped on a 1960s pinafore with bold, multi-coloured horizontal stripes. Over that, he shrugged on a badly scuffed and torn leather jacket and finished off with clunky, red Dorothy shoes and a canvas bag printed with large daisies. He took the documents from the table and shuffled through them, giving a final examination to the fake driver's licence. He pushed her hair away from his face to compare the photo to the face in the mirror. He remembered taking the candid shot some months ago when she had visited his apartment. Something had been bothering her and her sad face peered back at him. He smoothed his thumb over her unsmiling face before dropping the ID into the bag. Before long, he was at the Iron Plaza looking in windows for an appropriate phone.

He had little trouble finding a phone. There were, of course, a vast array of possibilities open in terms of package and plan. Pay-as-you-go were not the cheapest and by far offered the worst kind of security since they used recycled phone numbers, but it also required nothing from the purchaser but cash.

Waterproof phones were unfortunately expensive! The wad of cash Mira had given him was barely adequate, though it must have represented weeks worth of saved tips.

Cell phones were a necessary evil for Less. Even with his expertise in political intrigues and covert operations the labyrinthian cell phone packages, deals and options left him dizzy. He wasn't convinced they weren't a diabolical plot by one of the Others. Mira had wanted a pay-as-you-go phone but Less wanted to keep tabs on her. He decided to use the leverage of buying an expensive phone to negotiate a good monthly rate package with free texting. He arranged for the bills to be sent to him (in Mira's name). Less would prepare forged bills for Mira to pay-as-she-went and he would get a detailed trail of her activities.

When Less at last returned with his prize, he found Mira alone in the apartment. She'd managed to cook dinner as a thank you. She'd come up with some kind of a thin seafood soup, something like a chowder, but thinner. It was graced with crab, shrimp and had a heat to the flavor that built up as you ate it, but she included wine and some store-bought bread. It wasn't fancy, but it also was a bit of a surprise.

A Moment of Your Time, Nymph?

Two nights later, Tuesday evening.

"In all the time we've been under the pledge with Mira," Carson said, reclined comfortably in the oversized leather chair, "have any of us actually used the boon she's offered?" He looked around, and the rest of the coterie shook their heads.

"I haven't asked," Annabeth said, "because I don't know the limits of what she could do."

"And the fact things could rebound back," Wilson added, "even if unintended."

"There's a price to pay for everything." Minerva curled her legs beneath her on the divan.

"And we have not been using our resources as well as we could." Remy set down the book he was holding down with great care. "She said she could grant almost anything we could wish for, and do it gladly."

"You could simply wish to take the Don's place," Carson said with a grin.

Remy shook his head. "No, as tempting as that may be. I would rather achieve that goal through my own actions. Then I will not have the worries of Fate's fickle fingers hovering to snatch it away when I least suspect it."

"Is that the Grimm manuscript?" Annabeth asked. "The one where the stories are supposedly true, as opposed to cautionary tales?"

"It is." Remy trailed his gloved fingers across the cover. "Their takes about vampires are seemingly accurate, as is what I have been able to determine of both mages and werewolves."

"So it stands to reason," Wilson offered, "the ones about the fey are also true."

"Which story has caught your imagination this time," Minerva asked.

"The old couple who wished for a child." Remy looked from the book to his coterie.

"That one? Why?" Carson laughed.

"I think I could, that we all could together, do a much better job than they did with the child," Remy said softly.

"You don't mean..." They all looked at him with surprise.

"I do. I did not father a child before I was brought over," Remy said, "and I regret it. I was the last of my line, and it died out with me. I read the story again, and I can't help but wonder if it could be done. If I could father a child upon a living woman."

"Do you have a vessel in mind?" Wilson stood and started to pace.

"Mira was my first choice, given her power, but she has been corrupted by Xavier and Leo. I believe her friend Amber would be more suitable. Her head is easily turned by a handsome face, and should be relatively easy to guide down the path I want her to follow."

"If through some miracle you do succeed, what will happen when the child is born?"

"I'll take the child and ensure it is raised appropriately," Remy said, his voice cool and even.

"Will Amber allow it?" Minerva asked.

"Of course. She is in no situation to be raising a child. She will understand and agree my child will flourish under my care."

"But what would the child be?" Minerva frowned. "Human? Something else?"

"I do not know," Remy acknowledged, "but I do have a way to find out." He dialed Mira's number.

When the apartment phone rang, Mira was trimming her nails and deciding on a color. It was something she hadn't done since before... everything. She picked up the phone and cradled it in the crook of her neck while she examined her work.

"Hello?"

"Good evening, Mira." Remy's voice was smooth and friendly, with just a hint of naughtiness.

Mira's pulse quickened. She tried to sound casual. Could a vampire detect your heart rate over the phone? "Hi, Remy. How is everyone?" She didn't want to refer to Minerva and Betty by name so she trusted he knew to whom she referred.

"They are doing well. And yourself and your friends?"

"Really good," Mira said. "You know us. Always keeping busy."

"Indeed." Remy chuckled. "I was wondering if you might have some time tonight to speak with me. I would like to call upon a boon, as given in the pledge that binds us."

"Of course." She'd walked so long the previous night poking around and looking for that damned Key, her feet were still sore. She told Less she was taking tonight off, better to spend her time trying to think of how precisely she was supposed to detect the thing. "I'm staying in tonight. Would you like to stop by?"

"Certainly. In an hour or so?"

"Perfect," she said. "Gives me time to take a bath."

After they signed off, Mira went upstairs and took up that hour enjoying the luxury of her large hot tub.

A few minutes past the hour, the doorbell rang. Since Mira was still blow-drying her hair, Amber answered the door.

"Hi Mr. Deprez," she said cheerily. "Come in. Mira will be down in a minute."

"Good evening, Amber." Remy held out his hand to her.

She grabbed it and gave him a firm shake, then turned, intending to wander toward the living room, but Remy did not release her hand. Instead, he held it until she looked back

at him. With his eyes holding hers, he kissed her hand, his lips caressing her fingers with a subtly exotic touch.

"Oh!" she exclaimed, blushing. Her street-raised culture left her with no idea how to respond to that.

His smile turned encouraging, and he reluctantly released her hand. "Where shall we wait for Mira?"

"You can -- we?" She was about to just send him upstairs. "We can wait for her just here in the living room."

"Very good." He gave her a slight bow and gestured politely down the hallway. "After you, my dear."

Amber went, blinking in some surprise. She'd had the distinct impression he hadn't considered her worth any attention at all, but now she was wondering if she'd gotten it wrong. He did have a way of making a girl feel like she was the center of the universe. Maybe that's why Mira liked being around him.

They were both seated on the couch talking when Mira padded barefoot down the circular staircase and drifted toward them.

"Good evening, Mira," Remy said. He stood and kissed Mira on the cheek in greeting.

She smiled in return. "*Good evening to you, too. Is everyone doing all right?*"

"Nothing has changed for the worse since we spoke earlier." Remy said with a slight nod and smile. He looked at Amber. "I hope you'll forgive me, Amber, but I need to speak privately with Mira for a little while."

Amber showed him a coy smile and said, "It's not problem. Mira, can I take some of your tip money from the stand? I'll get us some cherry mochas and take my time doing it."

Mira smiled and nodded.

"Cool!" Amber opened a little drawer from a telephone stand and rifled through the bills that had been stuffed in there, selecting a few tens. She left with a wave.

As soon as she was gone, Mira asked, "*Is this about Leopold?*"

Remy shook his head. "No, this is something of a for more personal nature."

"*I'm all ears,*" she said. She slid onto the couch and gave him her full attention.

"I've been considering what you've told me about the boons you can grant," Remy said as

he took a seat as well. "And I was wondering how accurate the fairy tales were. I know of one where one of the fey gave a childless couple the ability to have a child. Is this something that could actually be done?"

Mira nodded. "Yes, this is possible," she signed.

Remy thought for a moment. "I would call upon the boon you offer as part of the pledge we share. I would like you to do a divination for me."

Mira paused. "Do you wish a general reading of portents for you, or something more specific?"

"Something specific. I wish to know about the child I will sire."

Mira nodded. "I suspected you would. I will grant you this boon but I remind you that I will not remember the answer I give, nor will I be able to do this again for about a day. I might be a little crazy for a while."

"I understand," Remy replied with a nod of his own.

Mira closed her eyes and settled back. *"I'm ready for your first question, and then you may ask three follow-up questions to that, for which you will receive the truth."*

"I wish to know about the child I will sire. Tell me about it."

Mira paused while the vision the question brought on formed in her mind. It took a moment to translate into words what she saw and felt. *"Your son will defy Fate, but only through great hardship. I do not see who the mother shall be -- this is in question. But I can see that the greater the power of your child's parents, the better chance your son will have of surviving, but the more attention he will draw from the Ancient Ones."*

"Will Amber make a suitable vessel to carry my son to term?" A little thrill ran through Remy at the words he said. He would have a son.

"If you were made fertile, then she would be suitable."

"How can I accomplish that through fey means?" Remy asked.

"What you seek is more than mere fertility. It is the granting of a legacy to one who would otherwise have none. It is a great and powerful thing filled with potential and possibility. As Hercules' potential for heroism as a mortal was greater than the potential of his immortal father, so shall be the potential of your son. I say this as your oracle."

"As your friend, I advise you that the power to grant a legacy can be acquired at great cost by bargain at a goblin market. You would be wise to bargain with a changeling who can be tempted and paid with mundane means and favors rather than risk your very being by

going to such a Market yourself. Choose someone with whom you can deal, and whose silence you can buy.

"I am a nymph. I care nothing for legacies and little for children. While I have no doubt you might convince me to grant you this legacy, I have no desire to have such power to do so. Rey, however, might. She is one of the Fairest and legacies concern them. So, too, does power in the name of vanity. Of anyone I know, she might be most easily tempted to acquire this power for you and then make the sacrifices needed to grant you your legacy in exchange for things she holds most dear.

"You may ask me a final question before my power fades."

"What would be the best way to approach her, to convince her to do this for me?"

"By presenting her with things she desires most. She desires knowledge."

Remy nodded, already thinking of what he might offer, and what Rey might ask for.

A few moments later, Mira looked around. She signed, "Did you ask your questions yet?"

"I have," Remy replied. "And now I have another question, but this one for you, Mira, not as a prophetess. My questions revealed that Amber would be the ideal mother for my child. If she does become pregnant, will you help watch over her, make sure our child is healthy and safe?"

"Amber would?" Mira muttered to herself unintelligibly. "Of course. Amber is my friend. I help my friends. She's always been true and I haven't been ... but she always has." She muttered some more, then looked back at Remy through feverish eyes and took a deep breath. She was more controlled when she spoke again. "I would do that regardless of whose child it was. Amber is my closest mortal friend."

"Very good." Remy extended a hand to Mira. "I appreciate your help with this."

She took his hand. "Of course, Remy. Please do be gentle with her. I don't think she's ever been with anyone before."

The Goblin Midwife

Rey both loved and hated the goblin markets. It was a place to find wondrous things, and she knew of the darker transactions that took place behind tent flaps and in shadowed pathways. She'd come to know some of the vendors by name, as she traded with them for

bits and pieces, things she needed for her hedgespinning. Since she started seeing Richard, she tended to stop by Gidjor Hammerhand's stall. The smith's work was both beautiful and practical, and the workmanship of some of his wares took her breath. She'd chat with him, discuss this weapon and that piece of armor, but she never bought or traded with him. Rey wouldn't presume to buy something for Richard, given his ownership of the Glacial Axe, and she herself had no real need for a weapon - not when she could grow claws.

Today, however, she merely nodded to him in greeting, and gave him the standard assurance that if she ever had more armagant parts she wished to trade, she would come to him first.

Another stall just down the path from Gidjor caught her eye as it always did. It was owned by a being who went by the name of Silk, and that is what she sold: silks and other fine fabrics from all over the Hedge. It was from Silk Rey had bartered for the fabric for the most recent gown she'd made for Mira. This time, a bolt of fabric that shimmered like oil on a stormy sea lay atop the other fabrics on the table.

"Witch Lafitte." Silk's voice was barely more than a soft whisper, but she could always be heard in the din of the market. "I have a new fabric, something I have set aside especially for you. The finest gauze, made from the heartstrings of the silver pegasids of the Forlorn Plains."

"Perhaps later, good Silk," Rey replied as she adjusted her grip on the old-fashioned metal lunchbox she carried. "I have an errand I must complete first."

An errand she never thought she'd have to make.

Business at the casino had been dropping off. The economy was slowing down, and fewer people were spending money there. Things weren't spiraling down into the toilet quite yet, but Rey certainly didn't want things to end up there. She'd feel like she'd failed Lyla, Chaska and the pack. Then Remy called her one evening, asking if she'd meet with him to discuss a potential business partnership.

Curious - and cautious - she agreed to meet with him. After the expected pleasantries, he came to the point. He knew what was happening with the casino. It was happening in many of Annabeth's clubs as well - the general public just wasn't spending as much money these days. Remy had an offer for her: he would send business her way, to the casino. He had many acquaintances who had more money than sense some days. For the privilege of VIP membership, and the use of one of the private ballrooms once in a while, he would promote their gambling at her casino instead of ones in Santa Fe. In exchange, he had a small favor from her.

Rey hadn't known what to think when he told her he wanted to have a child. As if he was discussing wanting to buy a new car, he continued, saying he'd heard of fairy tales where bargains could be made for barren couples could have children. If she could find a way to make it happen, for him to be able to sire a child, then he would ensure that Mountain

Garden would be the casino of choice for his associates with money to burn.

Rey was torn. As much as she hated the thought of vampires frequenting the casino, the business needed the money. She told him that if she did it, if she found a way to help him, the vampires he sent to the casino would have to behave themselves. She knew from the expression on his face that he knew and understood what would happen.

She also wanted something else from him, something for herself, as she knew what he was asking for would require her to pay a personal price as well. Knowledge, she said, about vampires. Not the truth, because they both know how vague the truth could truly be. No, she wanted facts about vampires. He appeared dismayed, but she knew that it was, at least in part, an act. With his contacts, he could get her what she wanted. It might take him a while to do so, but he would succeed. She cared little about what would happen if other vampires knew what he was giving her. She wanted the information both as a test of how badly he really wanted a child, and to ensure she would learn how better to deal with - and defend against - his kind.

And that was why she was strolling past all the stalls she usually visited and went to the corner of the market where she might find what she needed, a seller of Goblin Contracts.

Eyes peered out at her from the shadows, watching with a combination of hunger and curiosity, as she made her way to a tiny tent made of the skins of creatures Rey really didn't want to identify. A wizened old hob sat on a three-legged stool by the tentflap, smoking something foul-smelling in its pipe. "What brings you here, Changeling?" it asked in a voice that was an almost perfect copy of fingernails scraping down a chalkboard.

"Business," Rey said. "I understand you sell Goblin Contracts."

"I do," it replied. "What do you seek?"

"The contract of the Goblin Midwife."

The hob looked her over. "And how will you pay?" It smiled at her, its teeth broken and stained.

"With this." Rey lifted the lunchbox.

"Bah," the hob said and slumped backwards. "What use do I have for a mere metal box?"

Rey's lips curved into a little smile. "Not the box, but what is inside."

"Well, let me see."

Rey opened the lunchbox and folded back the rags to reveal the prize inside.

The hob stood up so quickly it knocked the stool over. "Is that--"

"The Hook," Rey said. "Taken as my prize. Do we have a deal?"

The hob nodded and eagerly reached for the terrible Token. "Indeed we do! Yes. My my, yes!" The hob swiped the Hook and with the same motion presented a scroll. "Your contract is here. Read it, sign it, and it is yours forever."

Rey read the document slowly, making sure it matched what she'd expected, then signed it.

Wednesday Evening

Mira mostly just worked Thursday through Saturday nights, though she'd asked for longer hours at those times. This proved to be a good thing as she just hadn't been able to quite her mind right since the previous night. She was pretty sure that Remy had asked her something that required the use of Diviner's Madness. She thought he'd been happy with what he learned, though she couldn't remember what he asked or what it was about, save for what he shared with her afterwards. And what he shared with her left her conflicted. The madness that had set in didn't help; she wasn't able to make any rational sense of it at all and had finally simply pushed it out of her mind.

To that end she decided she ought to spend her evening in company she was comfortable with and was reasonably sure that any odd behavior on her part wouldn't drive off said company. That ruled Drake out and Rey and Less in. But Rey had told her she had a evening appointment and couldn't make it this time.

So, she fired up the stove, invited Less over again and attempted a new concoction. This time it was chili made partly from scratch. (She used chili starter.) It was also vegetarian, being not a big fan of red meat.

Less enjoyed eating with Mira. His meals were usually utilitarian and spartan due to lack of time and money, so eating a meal that was carefully prepared was a treat. But beyond taste and aroma he found that he was slowly beginning to relax around her. He enjoyed her light-hearted re-telling of her day or Oliver's latest antics. He kept her talking, refilling her wine glass often. He didn't drink much himself, claiming he had to get back to Mythic for an early day, but in fact he planned on letting the night slip away until it was too late for him to leave.

Mira enjoyed herself more and more as the evening went. The temporary madness wore off by the time dinner was finished and she revealed an apple pie for dessert. The pie had turned out pretty well, but Less could tell that keeping Mira's glass full was a very effective strategy. Nor was she a heavyweight when it came to holding her liquor.

The bottle was nearly empty and most of it had gone through her glass when Less noticed Mira's smile and laugh came far more easily than it usually did. When she stood to find another bottle, she swayed a little before recovering and heading toward the kitchen.

Less stood and followed her into the kitchen. "I can't tell you how relieved I am that Spring is finally here," he said, laughing with her as he hunted for the bottle opener in his pockets while she brought out the fresh bottle. "The Winter Courtiers were reluctant at first but they rose to the challenge. But I couldn't have done it without your support - and Rey's, of course." He raised his glass to toast but found it empty.

Mira attempted to pour the wine into Less's, but it was still stoppered. She laughed at her silliness and surrendered the bottle to him to open. This one looked to be a small bottle, a sweet ice wine meant as a dessert wine. She'd received it as a gift among other bottles from Remy a few weeks back to commemorate the apartment being repaired (again).

She said while he opened the bottle, *"You are a very capable and brave person. Rising to the occasion and becoming King of Winter? That's a lot of responsibility, a huge change, isn't it? But you made it seem easy. Like you pulled on just another hat for a while, and now it's back to business as usual. I bet you could be anything you wanted to be."*

Less paused to think about all the extremely difficult decisions he'd had to make as King over the past season but decided he didn't want to bring any of that up right now and spoil the mood. His pause caused him to nearly overfill Mira's glass. He tried to avoid spilling it as he handed it to her and raised his glass once again for the toast, "To our Motley, best of friends. To us!"

Mira grinned. *"To us,"* she agreed and carefully slurped the wine so she wouldn't spill it. A dribble, escaping her notice, still slid tantalizingly down her chin.

The sight of the wine suddenly flashed Less back to a lost memory of his Keeper. *Her smiling face, lips looking all the more red against her pale skin. They framed sharp, white teeth. A thick, red liquid trickled down her chin, forming a glistening ruby.* He was wiping the drip off Mira's chin with his thumb before he knew the vision was over. He drew his hand back quickly and raised his glass again to cover his embarrassment. "To dribbles of wine!" He poured a hearty gulp down a mouth on his arm which he had rolled his sleeve up for.

She copied him and then decided to have a seat again. *"Phew. Either this stuff is strong,"* she remarked, *"or the world has decided to start swaying."* She giggled. *"Hey, how are you doing? Mythic is kind of a long way if you are feeling tipsy."*

"It's true," said Less. He glanced at his watch though he fully knew what time it was. "Whoa! Time flies! I may have missed my bus."

"Just crash here," Mira invited with a smile. *"If you want to. We have lots of space."* She didn't even mention the Hedge Gate not far away. Using that to get around locally was very inefficient anyway, and besides. A person who might be drunk going into the Hedge was just asking for something horrible to happen.

"To lots of space!" Less raised his glass again. He didn't drain his glass but was quick to

offer the bottle to Mira again. "You're very generous with your space," he continued after glasses were full once again. "It gives me a chance to talk to you about the Black Key we're looking for."

"I can afford to be generous with it," Mira said. She twirled in a circle, nearly sloshing her drink over the rim of her glass. *"It's free!"*

She stopped and took another drink. *"So. This Black Key thing. What's it look like anyway?"*

"That's just it, only you can see it with your magic eyes!" he said, pointing at her. "The Gates have been causing problems in the city but I couldn't tell if the Key was around because you weren't with me." He wagged his finger at her but kept smiling. "Naughty, naughty!"

She nodded. That made sense. How could he find it if she wasn't there to see it? *"Well, it sounds like a big project. I can't sense stuff like that with sorcery out past... four or five yards. I think. Or is it ten? I think I need a boost or something!"* She smiled and teased. *"Still, that would be something. Spending a day or three with the mythteri-- the mythy-- the mysterious Mr. Seleman? You know so many things about so many topics, I couldn't help but learn something new."*

Less' eyes twinkled. "Let's make a Pact!" He held up his little finger, crooked and ready for a light-hearted pinky-swear.

"A pact?" Mira looked curious. *"What kind?"*

"That we Pledge to not stray from each other's vicinity for, say, an hour until the Key is found. We could call upon a boon to help you."

She smiled and nodded, then halted. *"Wait. What? That doesn't seem very practical. Especially when we both have to work."*

"We don't work the same hours," pointed out Less. "C'mon, it'll be fun! Like an extended slumber party."

"True, but..." Mira looked uncertain. A promise was a big deal to her. A Pledge was even bigger. But through the haze of the wine, she couldn't quite grasp *why* it was any big deal. After Less prodded and encouraged her a little more, she capitulated. *"Well, okay. Just until we find the Key, like you said."*

She made the pinky-finger gesture and suddenly the Wyrd rose and bound them together in the Pledge. Mira wobbled, startled. Less felt the thrill of the Pledge rattle through him and he expelled sighs from every mouth. He steadied Mira on his arm and clinked their glasses together. "Until we find the *Eochair Dubh!*" he said quietly, but enthusiastically.

With that bit of business done, Mira wandered over to the entertainment console. There

was a remote for it and even some panels here and there throughout the apartment, but Mira never quite caught on to how to work it. She preferred to handle the knobs and dials on the stereo directly. The entertainment center was in a unit set into the wall just under the TV, also mounted on the wall. She bent over and studied an iPod plugged into it.

Less' head rocked over slightly to one side. Having Mira around constantly was going to be easy on his various eyes. He took in her legs from ankle to waist - smooth as ice. The spell-binding nymph's body had a hypnotic effect as she shifted her weight from one foot to the other.

Then suddenly there was music echoing throughout the apartment. Too loud at first, it diminished to manageable levels as she twisted the knob on the stereo. The music drifted into a slow, heavy beat, something moody and in Amber's preferred style gothic rock.

Less listened silently to the music for a while. He approved of the music since it would probably make Mira sleepy. "I like the cellos," he commented idly.

"Yeah," Mira agreed. "*Amber says they are electrified or something. I think the group is called Apocalypse Happens.*" She was wrong, of course. The name was Apocalyptica, according to the CD case that sat on the shelf directly below the stereo. And they did indeed manage a very full, heavy sound with their electrified stringed instruments.

Mira swayed and danced to the music while Less watched. After a few minutes, though, she started yawning and told him she probably should get some rest if they were going to get started on the search tomorrow.

She dug in a closet and found some extra sheets and blankets.

"*I'm sorry all I have to offer you is the couch. Will that be okay?*"

"Yes, of course!" Less gratefully accepted the bedding and set about making up a bed while Mira sleepily went upstairs. He busied himself with checking his email on his phone while Mira got ready for bed herself. When the bathroom was free he also prepared for bed, brushing his teeth with the new brush Mira had given him the last time he stayed over. After returning downstairs, instead of going to bed he quietly brewed himself some jarmyn tea and busied himself with Bleak Seal business to keep himself awake. Though he normally could sift through the reams of reports and data that his agents provided for hours, he found waiting a full hour difficult. Finally, he pushed it all aside, and crept up the stairs to Mira's bedroom.

He had to wait a few minutes for his eyes to adjust to the dark, but then he was able to slip past the big hot tub to her door. It was partly open and through it, he could see Mira asleep in her bed. She was partly uncovered, having fallen asleep face down, revealing she preferred to sleep in the nude.

He approached the side of her bed and traced the curve of her spine with his eyes. His

hand hovered over her back, just below her shoulder blades. Just below was the shard of ice, that piece of the Ice Queen. How he wanted to touch it, feel her strength beating inside. Instead, he gently touched Mira's temple and entered her Dreams.

He slid into her dreamscape effortlessly, his point of view hovering over a shimmering sea. Within the waters, he knew, lurked her dreaming consciousness. Plunging into the eery half-light of the dream-ocean, he floated down to find her dreams. He would observe at first before shaping them to his purposes.

To say he got an eyeful that first night would be an understatement. Several eyefuls would be not only more accurate, but also actually possible for Less.

Less had known Mira had relations with Remy and likely with Drake, but just how passionate a person she was had never really made itself quite so crystal clear to him. In her dream, he found himself watching unseen as she engaged in a somewhat bizarre fantasy involving being bound, with her own shed dress, to an old-style steam heater while a man had sex with her. At first, it looked like that vampire, Remy. But he very soon transformed into Drake.

He watched as Drake pushed her to the very point of orgasm and then stopped, ignoring her pleading for him to continue. Driven to the edge, she voraciously cleaned him off then took him orally until he was satisfied. The shockingly graphic dream concluded with Drake -- or was it Remy? -- driving her back to the height of pleasure.

Less, comfortable in his usual role as invisible observer, smiled to himself. He could not have written a better dream for his purposes. He dubbed in a slight modification to the soundtrack. Drake, as he was struggling for release, growled to her, "I know you're thinking about that vampire. If you're with me, there will be no one else. **Ever!** I control your pleasure and it will be a sexual desert!"

The dream suddenly ended, however, with no satisfaction.

Her dreams needed little interpretation here. Her libido was definitely providing an itch she wanted scratched, and it occurred to Less he'd read somewhere that alcohol tended to heighten many women's sex drive.

The next day Mira and Less did breakfast then hit the newspapers. The usual mix of good and bad news was there, but one story stood out as odder than usual. This was a story of an elderly woman who had literally eaten herself to death. She'd baked an entire 20-pound turkey and ate until her stomach ruptured. She was found by her neighbors who had appeared to play cribbage.

That bore some investigation. If the Black Key was involved, it would be necessary to find out if anyone had seen it or picked it up. Mira and Less went to the address, but people were still raw about the recent, unexpected death. Extensive interviewing of the neighbors revealed that the old woman had always loved Thanksgiving Turkey and had said it was

her favorite meal of the year. She wasn't known to have any kind of eating disorder, though she did love food.

However, no one admitted to seeing anything unusual or strange apart from the old woman's death itself.

Mira had to work that night, and it cut short their investigation. It wasn't something Mira would compromise on.

That night they had supper together. She picked up her new phone and called Drake to give him her new number and chat. Given the restrictions of the pledge they'd made, there wasn't really anywhere she could go to have a private conversation, so Less heard half of it. She told him that she and Less had pledged to investigate something dangerous together. Strength in numbers in this case was important and so they'd woven proximity into it, just until they found the thing they were looking for. She the told him she would call him Friday night, too.

Being out of wine, Mira went to bed sober. She was fine with that since she had a terrible hangover the previous morning. Once again, Less slipped unnoticed into her dreams.

Mira's first dreams were surreal, taking place in an ever-changing environment, places Less had never seen before and wasn't altogether sure Mira had seen before. The dreams were weak, flitting things and featured fragments of a cold, dead face that was animated -- a vampire Less had never seen before. Dark things happened and it was very difficult to get a grip on it. Mira didn't look like herself, either. She was instead a blonde girl barely 20, if that.

The dream turned into a nightmare. Less caught glimpses, half-remembered and barely there, of rape and torture while the dead face of a vampire looked on. Blood dripped, the girl drank. The girl soon didn't mind the abuse, but craved it because with it came Blood.

Less felt a building scream, shattering and soul-deep. The dream burst to pieces, dissolving and fleeing to the far corners of Mira's subconscious. He was able to step out of the room a split second before Mira shot bolt upright in bed screaming. Less heard running footsteps as Amber ran out of her room on the floor below and came running up the stairs. Lights came on in the apartment as she went.

She met Less at the top of the stairs. "Mr. Seleman? Oh, of course you'd hear it too." Amber looked passed him, pushing Mira's door open. They both could see Mira had fallen back into bed, already asleep again.

"There, see?" Amber said. "She's asleep again." Amber shook her head. "Nightmares. Ever since she got kidnapped. It used to be every night for the first few nights she came back, but it's not so bad now. Once a week. Maybe. She'll be okay. She never remembers any of it."

Less bit his lower lip in worry. "We had no idea," he whispered. Mira's other self, the other mind that Leopold and Xavier had crafted for her from Ellie's memories, had been a blood-slave to the vampires. Less had only gotten a glimpse of what that meant for Mira, and it wasn't pretty. He hoped he would be able to help her with these nightmares, scour them away. And he would, sometime, after he had arranged a few things first. He bid Amber goodnight and returned to his couch downstairs.

Amber followed him down and returned to her own bedroom on the lower floor. The rest of the night passed quietly. Less had learned something about Mira, something hidden, but not what he'd been looking for. The question was, did he keep searching? Or did he move ahead on his plan? Did he really want to know what other dark things might be lurking in the mind of the Ice Princess?

Now that Less had seen the extent of the hidden within Mira's subconscious he wanted more. And he wanted to help her deal with these things. It was a herculean internal struggle, but Mira had told Drake she'd call him Friday night. Though the Pledge basically prevented Drake and Mira from getting together, the Summer warrior had his own subliminal message campaign going on and Less needed to meet that charge. He would spend the night implanting a suggestion against Drake and on subsequent nights he would try to learn more about Mira. So he could help her, of course.

The Storm King would be receiving a forged letter from the Las Vegas Freehold today complaining of brutal attacks by briar wolves in the Hedge on their northern border. They were last seen headed for the Duchy of Iron Mountain. Summer would also be receiving the Constable of the Bleak Seal's report of briar wolf sightings on the border of Duchy territory. In the letter, Less suggests for Drake and Tara, both famed warriors, to be sent to deal with the problem.

The next day passed without the Black Key causing another incident, which really only made Less and now Mira nervous. Where was the blasted thing? What was it up to?

She had to work at the little bar again that Saturday night. She called Drake after donning her waitressing outfit, as she'd promised. Less realized by the excitement in her voice she'd been looking forward to it all day. Their conversation hovered around telling him she missed him and wanted to see him, but apologizing again that they had made no headway in their project. She listened to something he said for a minute.

"But why do you have to go do it? You don't hold some office as protector of the Duchy do you?" Mira pouted, obviously disappointed and worried about something. *"But Drake... yeah I know. We could go with you. Less and I. I'm good in a fight, promise! And who wouldn't want the strength of Winter -- oh."* She sounded terribly disappointed.

Then she perked up. *"Really? Tomorrow? So you are still available tonight. I have to work..."*

Suddenly she stopped pacing in the kitchen and turned toward Less. Her eyebrows shot

up. *"Really? You're serious."* Then she laughed and turned away. *"Sweatheart, I love that you said 'dancing', but what you probably don't know is that I have a membership there and I already know what kind of club it is."* She laughed again. *"Yes. I just got the membership card this week after working out a deal with Aurra. Yes, that's right, the witch that put up the wards on my apartment. She owns the place. Are you kidding? I'd love to go! I'm off around ten or ten thirty, is that too late? Okay. I'll ask him then."*

Mira looked at Less again and gave him a coy smile. *"Um. Less? I have a question for you. Would you like to go on a date with Drake and I?"*

Less looked at her with a bit of surprise. *"Honestly? How could anyone like to be a third wheel on a date?"* But he saw the disappointment on her face. *"But I'm sure it will be fun,"* he conceded. *"Where are we going?"*

"After I get off work later tonight Drake will pick us up and we'll go to a place called the Blood Tears Club for, um, dancing?"

Mira frowned. *"Okay. I'm sure we'll dance, but that's not what the club is really known for. It's a sex club."* She winced, expecting an outburst.

"I am aware of the Blood Tears Club," said Less coolly. "I'm a little surprised that Drake would want to bring you and I there. What if the Key shows up while you're 'dancing'? But if you really have your heart set on going there, I'm willing to tag along. I'm sure there will be plenty of interesting information to acquire there."

"Well if the Key shows up while I'm on a date, I'll be pretty disappointed," Mira said. *"Anyway, I think Drake likes you."*

Normally used to changelings' various predilections, Less was a bit shocked. "Do you mean he *likes me* likes me?"

"I wouldn't presume to know that," she said, *"but I don't know why he wouldn't, unless he's not into men. I never asked. I wouldn't be surprised, though, because you have plenty going for you."*

Less let the comment go unanswered, though the compliment did make him feel good. "I guess I should save him a dance, then." He let Mira get on with her waitressing and retreated to a relatively undisturbed corner to get on with some work. The first thing he did was call Worm. He had Remy's number from Mira's cell phone records. He told the Sergeant-in-Mourning to send an anonymous text to the number (being Remy's) stating that Mira Naia would be at the Blood Tears Club tonight. He wasn't exactly sure what Mira and Remy's relationship was at this point, but Less hoped the vampire's presence at the club would disrupt the date with Drake some. Less hoped Remy would show.

A few minutes later, Wormed called him back. She'd tried several times, she said, but the message bounced. Less sent his thanks. It had been worth the try.

Mira's shift ended close to 10:30 by the time she'd finished cashing out. She disappeared into the ladies' room to change into club clothes she'd brought along, leaving Less to consider the evening so far.

The nymph certainly got more than her fair share of attention from customers. The difference these days was that she noticed. He could tell that it wore on her patience to deal with those who thought they had a right to touch or handle their waitress. Those types of people were few in this place, though. Mostly people just flirted with her, something she seemed to enjoy. At least, she usually wore a smile and bantered a little. This won her some pretty good tips.

At 10:35, Drake strolled into the bar. He wore skin tight black leather pants and a blue shirt that was almost the exact shade as his scaled skin, and the outfit showed off exactly how fit - and well endowed - he was. His eyes quickly scanned the room, and he saw Less seated at a table near the bar.

The draconic changeling made his way toward the table. "Good evening, Winter King," he said with a friendly smile.

Less gave him a wry smile and offered him a chair. "What? No flowers?"

"I'm sorry. I didn't think you'd accept them." Drake took a seat, still smiling.

Mira walked out of the restroom. Tonight she had put on a blue halter top mini dress with an open back and loose-fitting top. It was obvious a bra couldn't be worn with it and it teased the imagination with the possibility the fabric would slide over to reveal a breast in all its supple glory. She was barefoot but carried a pair of open-toed silver high heels in one hand.

When she spotted Drake a huge smile appeared on her lips and she hurried straight over. Her momentum carried her swiftly toward him and he realized she wasn't slowing down about the time she jumped into his arms and gripped him in a voracious hug.

Drake had braced himself before she left the floor and caught her as if she weighed no more than a feather. "No, don't tell me. You're happy to see me," he murmured before capturing her lips in a kiss.

Her return kiss was full of moist heat. Her body pressed against his, she stayed that way until he finally put her down. Her eyes shone. "I missed you," she signed.

"I missed you too," Drake signed back in ASL. "More than you could know."

Less waited patiently for the public displays of affection to die down. He had often been around Mira and her beaux, and though several of his hidden eyes rolled dramatically, he could put up with it.

Mira signed, "Let's go!" and looped her arms in one of Drake's and Less's both.

Drake drove them to Mythic City and found his way to the club without too much difficulty. They found that Saturday night was a pretty busy time for Blood Tears and parking a bit of a challenge. They had to walk over from a general parking garage. Mira had her new club card and she brandished it.

They were alone on the street, or at least no one was close but Mira spoke quietly anyway to avoid unwanted attention. *"As a member, I can bring one guest. Are either of you members, too, by any chance?"*

Drake shook his head. "I'm not. I've been here before once, as a guest, though."

"Who did you come with that time?" asked Less. "Maybe she will bring you in as a guest again," he suggested.

Mira poked Less. *"Be nice. Okay, Drake will be my guest. Less, I'll make sure they don't notice you come in if you just follow us quickly. And then it will be a feast of emotions in there! We can meet up at the bar."*

"Sounds good to me," Drake said. "I wouldn't ask the lady who brought me here before to bring me in as a guest tonight. I'm here with Mira. And you." Drake winked at Less.

The group approached the main doors and the doorman checked her club card. He looked at it while she said, *"Myself and guest, please."*

He took one look at the card and then looked up at Mira already spellbound by her Voice. "Yes of course, Miss Naia. Are you here to meet with the Third Tier?"

Mira blinked at him and looked blank.

"See here?" He pointed to a little gold star in the corner of her membership card. "That means you are a third tier member, invited by Miss Wyborne herself. You didn't know?"

She shook her head.

"Ah, well I'm sure there's a very good reason you're third tier. If you want to explore third tier benefits, just head to the door at the back of the club and show the man there. He'll let you down to the basement levels where other third tier members get together."

"Oh, now I get it. I know what that means." She touched the doorman's cheek in a friendly gesture as her voice had again captivated him. She smiled and passed inside. The doorman, thoroughly distracted by her, didn't notice Less at all.

Less walked in casually, used to not being noticed by anyone. He had never been inside

the club before, but had had so many reports from Claire and others that he felt he knew almost every inch of it. He surveyed the crowd for familiar faces, especially vampires.

Drake looked around at the crush of people, and used the closeness of the crowd to press up against Mira from behind. He wrapped his arms around her, one hand cupping and caressing her breast, the other low, his fingers caressing her mons. "Want to go get a drink?"

The way her body pressed back into his showed him she enjoyed his touch, even if it was in the more public part of the club. She wished she was taller so that she could just tilt her head back and kiss him on the neck, but at six foot, he was a good eight inches taller than her, and even her three inch heels wouldn't give her the needed height. Instead, she just relished having his arms around her, then nodded to indicate her desire for a drink.

Less noticed, among other things, that Mira and Drake's affectionate play was one of the more aggressively graphic displays. But looking away, he found to his dubious relief that Rey was here, standing at the bar while the 'tender made her a drink.

Less nodded to Rey as he made his way to the bar and signalled for a beer. Once he had it in hand he regrouped with Mira and Drake. "So, Drake, I didn't peg you as someone who came to Blood Tears. It's generally a place for swingers."

Drake shrugged. "I've been here just once before, with the lady I was Blood Tears is whatever you want it to be when it comes to sex. A lot of couples or threesomes come here. Or are you a swinger, and you're trying to warn me to be careful?" He was curious as to the pointed questions and comments.

Over Less' shoulder he saw Rey weaving her way through the crowd, and he couldn't help but appreciate what he saw. She wore black spandex leggings, a blood red bustier made of a leather he didn't recognize, with an oversized black silk shirt open over it. Her hair was up in a wild riot of curls held in place by long bone sticks, and on her feet were 4-inch stiletto heeled shoes she moved in as she was born wearing them.

Noticing Rey's attire, it made Less suddenly self-conscious of his plain, drab work clothes. He hadn't know he was going out tonight. To Drake he replied, "I've never been here before but I notice things. It is clear that you are a desirable commodity here."

Mira looked up at Drake. "*If you are a commodity, I'm buying.*" Her eyes swept past him and she suddenly noticed Rey. "Rey?" she said in total surprise. "*Good to see you! But what are you doing here? Is Richard here?*"

"No, this isn't Richard's kind of place," Rey replied, "though he's here in spirit." She lifted her glass slightly and took a sip of her drink. "I'm just here to hang out. I'm surprised to see you here, Less. Definitely not somewhere I thought I'd see you."

"I'm here with Mira, keeping an eye out for the Key." He turned back to Drake, "So, how

do you feel about all the women and men here wanting a piece of you?"

"What's with the Inquisition," Drake asked with a puzzled look on his face.

"The Key?" Rey asked Mira in Glymjack sign. "Do you think it'll show up here tonight?"

Mira signed in return, "Not unless it's in Drake's pants. Which it could be. I'd like to execute a thorough search."

"Look," said Less, finding Drake nearly impossible to talk to. "Since we're stuck with each other tonight I thought I would try to get to know the *famous, dashing, Summer warrior* a little better."

"I don't know about famous," Drake said, "but I don't think we're stuck with each other. The three of us could have a lot of fun." He moved his hands to Mira's waist, but still held her against him.

"Sure! Okay, we'll have lots of fun," laughed Less. He took a swig of his beer and tried again. "I'm just interested to know what its like for a guy like you, in a strictly monogamous relationship, to be in a place like this?"

"*I think it's very adventurous,*" Mira broke in. She put her hands over Drake's in a gesture that showed she was comfortable with him there. Then she reached out with one hand and took Less's hand, too. "*It's okay, Less. Let's all just relax and have a drink. We should tell Rey about the Key, too.*"

"I'll go see if they've got a room upstairs free. That way we can talk and not have to worry about being overheard." Rey smiled slightly. "And then I can leave you three to what you came here for."

"*Let's just use Glymjack,*" Less signed. "*Rey, as we saw with the Dragon, the Gates seem to be letting something into the Mortal world from Arcadia, possibly even one of the Others. These weird emotional incidents occurring in the city seem to be caused by the Gates somehow and I think the Key might be drawn to them. At a grocery store the other day where people were killed by tomatoes, I saw a little hob in a large black purse. The purse was then stolen away by a surprisingly spry old woman. It's possible that the Key was the purse but Mira is one of the only people around who has the power to know for sure. Thus, we pledged to stick together until we found the Key. Considering the emotional states of the clientele, the Blood Tears does seem a likely place for the Gate activity to occur.*"

"Killed by tomatoes?" Rey signed, not quite sure she understood what Less was saying. "How did each victim die? What were they doing?"

Less told Rey the whole story through sign starting from the incident on the bus, the deaths at the grocery store and even the woman who ate herself to death.

"It sounds to me," Rey signed, "like everyone who has died when in the presence of the black bag died according to the victim's weakness, their vice. Wrath, gluttony, and so on. Lust is definitely prevalent here, but what makes you so sure the Key will turn up here. The woman at the grocery store went into a rage, didn't she? And why did the two of you do that pledge? You're actually reducing the chances of the Key being found."

"I'm not sure of anything regarding the Key or the Gate," signed Less. "I know of no way to predict where these events will occur. I only know I need to stay with Mira to have any chance of finding out anything about the Key, which is why I gave her a fae blessing to detect the Key if she stayed in my vicinity. Mira and Drake wanted to come here on a date, so I'm here too, and it's as good a place as any to watch for it."

"Okay." Rey thought that sounded a little weird, but she didn't want to argue. "Mira, can I get your help with something in the ladies' room." She made a little grimace and shifted like she was uncomfortable. She had speak out loud rather than sign it because Mira had her arms looped around Drake's neck and her attention had certainly wandered. He'd taken a seat and she decided his lap made a good seat for herself.

"*Hm? Oh yes of course, Rey.*" Mira's reply was very soft and Rey had to strain to hear it. She didn't want her voice drawing too much attention.

"I promise to bring her straight back," Rey said to Drake with a smile.

Drake nodded, and released Mira, running his hands lightly around her body as he did so.

As they walked into the ladies room, Mira was so excited she was already signing before Rey turned to see. "...best date ever so far! Drake has been really free with the touching thing tonight, and I love that! He hasn't done that very much in the past, so I think this place might have something to do with it, don't you think?"

"Maybe," Rey signed back. "If Richard was here, it'd likely be the exact opposite, and there's no way I'd take him upstairs." She took her shirt off and turned to look at herself in the mirror. "What do you think? Do I still look good in this?"

Mira stepped behind and to the right of Rey so Rey could see her signing. "What do you mean, still? Of course you look good in that.

"So what brought you out to the club tonight?" Mira asked. "Are Marie and the others here?"

"I think Marie is upstairs with Carson," Rey replied. "I'm not sure who else is. I wanted to get a drink before checking to see." She frowned. "I don't know. Something about this thing feels wrong. Would you mind checking the back and seeing if the edging is folded funny, or if something is in there that shouldn't be?"

Mira did so, checking and smoothing the material, then re-tying the laces.

"I appreciate it. You know, I don't know if Richard has ever seen me in this." Rey chuckled. "Not that we ever go somewhere that I'd wear it." She would love to go places where she could dress up like this, but Richard was uncomfortable in most places because of the noise level of the music. "Say, have you spoken to Remy lately?"

"He stopped by my apartment Tuesday. Why do you ask?" Mira signed.

"He hasn't mentioned anything about having a child to you, has he?"

"It might have come up," she signed, "but such a thing is a very tall order for a vampire. I take it he asked you about it, then."

Rey nodded as she put her shirt back on. "He doesn't plan on using you to get the child, does he?" she signed quickly.

She blinked. "I think there was a miscommunication. I don't think he intends to adopt, and I won't kidnap anyone for him."

"That's not what I meant. You haven't agreed to let him get you pregnant, have you?"

Mira frowned. Little blank spots in her memory that occurred when she used Divine Madness were sometimes a little worrying. It was impossible to remember what was asked of her and what her answers were. Technically, Remy could have lied to her about who the best mother of his child could be.

The look of worry passed, though. She was almost certain she would make a lousy mother. Although, she had to admit to herself she'd try her best to be a good mother if it happened.

She shook her head partly to clear it and partly in answer to Rey's question. "Not to my recollection. He told me he had someone else in mind."

"That's good." Rey's head tilted to one side. "Are you okay?"

She smiled and nodded. "Are you going to help him?"

"Yes." Rey's smile was wry. "And my services aren't cheap."

"Bringing life where there would never naturally be one shouldn't be," Mira agreed. "I'm glad he asked you for it."

"Why?"

"Granting someone the gift of a legacy is something that would require a goblin bargain or

contract and those carry a high price of their own. I don't think I'd be as objective in an asking price of Remy than I should be. But you are neutral. You can be objective in a way I can't be with him."

"Perhaps. Or I could be asking more from him that I would ask from others," Rey pointed out.

"Why would you do that?"

"Because of what he is," Rey replied easily. "Because I know how much he wants it."

"If he's willing to pay, then it's worth it to him."

"We'll see." Rey looked at herself in the mirror again. "I definitely need to get Richard to see me in this. Did you know he once called me a a terrible dryad, a temptress of the night." She smiled, remembering that night.

"We ought to get back, before Less gets overwhelmed." She chuckled.

Mira didn't move, though. A couple other women passed by on their way to stalls, talking loudly. "You never talk about him," she signed. "Does he make you happy?"

"He does," Rey signed in return. "I feel... peaceful when I'm with him."

"Does he know you are here without him?"

"I don't know," Rey said, "but I'm here to hang out with Yvonne, Aurra and the other witches who are here. Not for sex. He knows I wouldn't stray or cheat on him. Do you think I should tell him I'm here?"

"No. No no no," Mira shook her head emphatically. "Because then, no matter what you say, he'll think he should be here and then he won't like it and be all... prickly. Also, he'll start worrying in the back of his mind you'll think he's boring or not as handsome as others or whatever men get insecure about."

Rey couldn't help but chuckle, then her amusement faded. "He does know I come here, though probably not about my membership. The night you were kidnapped, we came here to get my leg healed. It was a mess." She shook her head. "They were scared of him, and he was so frustrated and upset at what had happened. Aurra refused to allow him into the rooms to be with me while Yvonne healed my leg, and I had to make sure I didn't let on how much it hurt, or he would have come charging in, axe swinging, to protect me."

"I believe he'd do that, too," Mira signed without a doubt.

"It's not surprising, though. He's very much an alpha. His beast, when roused..." Rey couldn't help but shiver with the remembered thrill of it.

"I'll take that as 'sexy'," Mira replied with a smile.

"With him, oh yeah. There's a fine line between alpha and asshole, but I don't think he'll cross it."

Mira looked away, then back. She wanted to get back to her date, but it bothered her that Richard felt so menacing toward her. "I wish he liked me. I always feel like if I'm very much unwelcome when I'm around him."

"It's your association with Remy and his friends that bothers him. After what Caterina did to Betty, I can't really blame him." Rey's fingers paused for a moment, as she tried to figure out the best way to say it. "He's concern about your safety, and whether or not your loyalty to our Queen and the Duchy has been compromised by the pledge you've made with Remy's coterie."

"That's not even fair," Mira said. "He doesn't have a problem with you and werewolves, apparently. He just hates all vampires. There isn't anything I can do or say, is there."

"I'm not in a pledge, backed by the Wyrd, with any of my werewolf friends," Rey replied. "There's nothing between us but friendship. And there are things you can do. You can not renew the pledge with Remy and the coterie, and tell us what they're up to if it might be a threat to the Duchy."

Mira didn't know that Rey didn't have a pledge with the wolves. "They wouldn't associate with a spy," Mira signed. She sighed. "And he pledge we all take that makes us part of this Duchy takes precedence over the very minor pledge I have with them. That pledge is as much about providing them with a gesture of trust as it is a way to generate glamour for me. You know it's not as easy for me to get glamour as it is for other changelings. If he can't understand that, then he's just being stubborn and unfair."

"He doesn't know the details of the pledge. All he knows is that there is one. But you know, there might be another reason why you don't feel comfortable around him. He's just big and intimidating, and the Paladin of Shadows. His beast is always there, lurking just beneath his skin. It's powerful, and it takes a lot of willpower not to let it rule him. I'm not intimidated by it so much because I used to live with that kind of thing all the time, with werewolves."

Mira became unsure her impression was correct. "I hadn't considered that. Well, should we get back before the boys decide to send in a rescue mission?"

"We probably ought to," Rey said, taking one last look at herself in the mirror before opening the bathroom door and letting Mira precede her.

"So, alone at least," Drake said to Less with a grin.

"Uh huh," said Less, taking a swing of his beer. "They say that vampires like it here. Do you think anyone in this room is one?"

"I have no idea. What do you think?"

Less pointed with his bottle at a woman with dyed platinum-blond hair. She was topless but covered her nipples with black electrical tape Xs. She also wore a mask that was reminiscent of an animal skull. "She looks like a blood-sucker."

"She probably sucks quite well," Drake said with a shrug, "but she's a little too obvious. Why does it matter if there are vampires here?"

"It doesn't. It's just a fun game I play. I thought we could amuse ourselves until the girls return."

Drake chuckled, and a naughty grin grew on his face. "There are so many ways to do that which involve more than just talking."

Drake seemed to enjoy having him on, so he played along. "A game of darts then, yeah?"

"I was thinking something a bit more hands on."

"Are you feeling okay?" Less didn't know Drake very well but he thought he was acting strangely. Even Mira had commented (favourably) on his sexual aggressiveness. "Can I get you some water or something?"

"I'm fine. You're along on Mira and my date, and I'm just trying to find out how much you want to be involved."

"I'm flattered and everything," said Less. "But excuse me if I'm a little off-balance. I'd heard that monogamy was important in your relationship with Mira."

"It is, but that doesn't mean we can't invite people to play with us," Drake replied.

"Oh, I see." He didn't, not really. He couldn't imagine someone forbidding their partner to have sex with other people, and then condone it right in front of him. He supposed it must make a difference if permission was explicitly given. "Thanks, but I don't think that's my thing. You might try Remy. He's probably more to Mira's liking."

Drake shrugged. "Perhaps, but I don't see him giving and taking from the both of us."

But you think the cold and heartless Winter King would? "I wouldn't be so sure, but this place is packed so I like your chances to find someone." He drank more beer. "You seem

to have a knack at reading people. Where did you pick up that little gem?"

"You learn what you need to to survive," Drake said with a shrug. "You have a knack for gathering information and secrets. Where'd you learn that?"

"In service to the Duchy." *Where were those girls?*

They returned soon after the thought hit Less. Mira had a smile and a bounce in her step as she approached Less and Drake. She stopped between them and asked, "*Who's going to buy me a drink?*"

"That would be me," Drake said, standing. "Do you have a preference, or shall I surprise you?"

"*Surprise me with something that isn't dry or gritty.*" She paused to wonder where she'd picked up a sudden impression of desert-like conditions.

"It'll be my pleasure," Drake replied with a grin as he went to the bar.

"How long are the three of you planning on staying tonight?" Rey asked, taking a sip of her own drink.

Mira glanced at Drake and Less. "*Well, Drake drove so it's probably more up to him, but I should be good for a few hours. Tomorrow Less and I need to take up that search again, so we can't be out so late we sleep the day away.*"

"I could meet up with the two of you," Rey said.

"Good idea," said Less. "Come by Mira's apartment."

Rey looked at Less, then at Mira. "Exactly how close do you have to stay to each other while the pledge is in effect, and what will happen if one of you breaks it?"

Mira decided to let Less handle that, as her memory of exactly what she promised was a bit foggy. She blamed the wine she'd had that night. She watched the bartender put together a mysterious, pink, frozen concoction with curiosity. Whatever Drake had ordered for her was a small drink, a cocktail, but she had no idea what it might be.

"Just nearby," explained Less. He didn't feel like debating the specifics now that it was over and done with. "We don't have to sleep in the same bed if that's what you're insinuating. If we break the pledge, the standard poisoning of the boon applies."

Rey stared at Less. Something was off here, but she wasn't quite sure what. The whole idea of that pledge was odd. "If sticking together is that important, why wasn't I included in the pledge?"

"So you can go off and consult with the Sages and be a free agent. Mira is the only one who can detect the Key so I needed her to be close at hand. The pledge gives her a better chance to find it. I explained this before."

When the bartender presented the treat, Mira picked it up, looked at it and smelled it. She seemed pleased, but paused, noting there wasn't anything in Drake's hand. "*Are you being good because you are driving? We could always get a cab if you wanted to join in,*" she said in the most tempting voice she could manage.

Drake leaned forward and whispered "I'd rather become intoxicated by you than any drink the bartender could create."

Mira took a big, frosty swallow, finishing her drink. Mira said to Rey and Less, "*Drake and I will be upstairs. Catch you two later, okay?*"

Rey chuckled. "Have fun." She looked at Less. "You haven't been here before. Would you like me to show you around?"

"Only if your witch friends are part of the tour," he said without much hope.

"Why do you want to meet them?" Rey asked curiously.

He shrugged. "It would be useful information."

Rey watched him for a moment as if weighing something. "Okay," she finally said. "We'll leave meeting them for last. I won't promise they'll want to meet you or that they'll let you in, but I'll see what I can do."

"Okay." He got up to follow her. His beer bottle was all but empty but he kept it anyway so he wouldn't be bothered by the staff. She led him up the stairs into a full fledged orgy. People in all degrees of undress were having sex on or against every available surface. On their left, a paunchy middle aged man was being ridden by a woman who looked barely legal wearing nothing but cowboy boots and translucent plastic wrap around her breasts like a tube top. They couldn't see the expression on his face as she enthusiastically bounced up and down on him because it was buried in the pussy of another woman, this one wearing a spiked collar with matching wrist and ankle cuffs, and a chain-linked leash hung from her collar.

On their right a guy in a three piece suit with the obvious build of a serious weight-lifter was bent over the back of a chair, his ass being pounded into by another guy, skinny as a rail, in jeans and a sweatshirt, wearing workboots. Both men were grunting and groaning, letting the world know how much they were enjoying themselves.

"Most of the sex goes on up here," Rey said, stating the obvious as she threaded her way through the narrow clear walkway. It was obvious the activity going on didn't phase her in the least, though she enjoyed the rush of Glamour over her skin as she drank a little bit of

it in.

Less found the Glamour was muted by the drugs that people were clearly on to elevate their sensations. Give him true heartbreak over these empty calories any day. He continued to follow Rey.

Further down the corridor, there were doors to their left. "Those are rooms," Rey said with a slight wave of her hand, "for those who want some privacy, or some special kind of play. Each room as a different theme; a doctor's office, a dungeon, a playboy suite, that kind of thing. Drake and Mira are probably in one now."

Halfway down the corridor, the door to one of the rooms was open. As they walked past, Less could see a woman standing completely nude in front of a paint covered drop cloth that hung from the ceiling, protecting the walls and floor. A man was on his knees beside her, airbrushing paint onto her skin.

Less vaguely hoped the woman wouldn't die of poisoning.

"What do you think of the club so far?" Rey asked, stepping closer to Less. Her naturally seductive scent teased his senses. "See anything you like? That interests you, that you might want to try with that special lady in your life?"

"Not really my thing," Less admitted. The whole place made him feel a little lonely. It highlighted the wounds that his Keeper had inflicted upon him, everything that she had stolen from him. All these things allowed him absolute focus on his duties to the Bleak Seal and the Duchy, but it set him apart from society, changeling and mortal. He certainly didn't want to tell Rey that he hadn't had sex since being ejected from the Ice Queen's kingdom. It normally didn't bother him, but the whole night was making him feel somewhat inadequate. "Are we going to see the witches now?"

"You're like a little kid, impatient for a treat," Rey said with a laugh. "Let's head back downstairs."

Less followed eagerly this time. "Do they meet here every night?"

"They don't have official meetings every night if that's what you're asking," Rey replied. "The rooms downstairs are for hanging out. They come here when they're looking for company amongst their peers. I seriously doubt they come every night."

"Why do they meet here? Because Ishtar owns the club?" Less knew the answers to his questions, but asked them anyway. Independent confirmation, if you will.

"She does? I didn't know that. Not surprising, though." Rey continued down the stairs and along the side of the dance floor toward the man standing by the door marked private.

"Good evening, Gerald," Rey said with a friendly smile. She took her membership card

out of a hidden pocket and offered it to the man. "Is Aurra in tonight? My friend here would like to meet her."

Less nodded to the man and waited patiently.

"She just came back in a few minutes ago," he said. He opened the door for them and the two of them passed into a stairwell leading to a sub-floor.

After descending the stairs and pushing the metal door at the bottom open, they found themselves in the underbelly of the club. Thumping music coming from above was muted here. Less could see that the he stood at the intersection of a couple of hallways, each of which had doors along them. But directly ahead he saw a tall woman with long dark hair in a black dress accompanied by a shorter woman with medium-length red hair. The red-haired woman had been saying something to her companions when the stairwell door closed. She turned and looked at Rey and Less and stopped. Then the tall woman stopped and looked back over her shoulder, too.

They traded looks and then turned to face Rey and Less.

"Good evening, Aurra," Rey said warmly to the tall woman, as two of her wisps darted out of her hair to circle Aurra and her companion before disappearing off into the night.

"Welcome, Rey," Aurra said. "I'd heard you'd come to visit tonight. And you brought a friend?"

"I did." Rey glanced at Less for a moment. "This is Les Seleman. He's curious about my friends here, and hoped to meet you." She wondered if Aurra might pick up on the hidden meaning in her words.

She and her companion walked toward him. "Pleased to meet you," she said, extending her hand.

"The pleasure is all mine, certainly," said Less, bowing his head.

Aurra let her hand drop to her side, then introduced her companion. "This is my friend, Eleanor." The blue-eyed girl smiled and greeted them with a little wave using only her fingers.

"Nice to meet you," Rey said to the girl, then looked back to Aurra. "I'm sorry. We're not interrupting anything, are we?"

Eleanor said, "I don't need to take any more of Aurra's time." She turned to Aurra. "Thanks for everything."

"Not at all Ellie. I'll see you in a few days."

The red-head smiled at Rey and Less, then squeezed past them to get to the door. Rey stepped back to give her room, the Fairest's brambles shifting out of the way so as not to scratch Eleanor.

Less thought Aurra was the name of the witch who had warded Mira's apartment but he didn't want to say anything inappropriate. Rey had been careful about mentioning anything other than mundane items. Did that mean Eleanor was not a witch?

"Shall we go sit down and get comfortable?" Rey asked. "I know Less has some questions he'd like to ask."

"Of course," Aurra replied. She turned and she produced keys from somewhere, unless they were already in her hand. She unlocked the nearest door and invited them inside.

The carpet in the room consisted of a thick material that consisted more of loose loops than a shag. It was a brick color with brown flecks. The room was lined with bookcases and many of them had numerous binders, notebooks, journals, and unlabeled books. None of them had labels on their bindings, hinting that these were all hand-written journals. There were also a few oak tables and matching chairs. These were meant to be used for long periods, and so they had cushions on the seats, but the arms were wood.

Aurra pulled out a chair at one of the tables and invited them to join her. Rey took a seat to her right and made herself comfortable. This wasn't a room she'd been in before, but she wasn't so curious that she would start nosing around.

"This is a very interesting library," commented Less. It was hard to believe what was going on upstairs in such academic surroundings. Still nothing had been said about anyone's true nature so Less took a seat and let Rey take the lead.

"It can be," Aurra said. "So, you had some questions?"

Less decided to dive right in. "We're looking for something hidden. Can you help us find it?"

Less heard a buzzing sound, like a fly whizzing by his ear, and then it was gone.

Aurra was saying, "That's not all you are looking for. You also want something from someone. Another thing that is hidden. I can't help you find the thing you mentioned. But I can give you what you want most."

Rey looked from Aurra to Less, wondering what it was the witch was talking about. Her annoyance at Less making an end run around her, asking Aurra for help, simmered in the background.

A flash of anger and frustration roared through him and read plainly on his face. He nearly hammered on the table. It surprised him. His elemental nature was usually kept

his emotions muted and distant, but this intrusion on his privacy cut him deeply. "This was a mistake," he managed at last. "My mission is a matter of life and death. My personal projects are trivial in comparison, and none of your concern." Even as he said it, his mind howled in frustration. *Could the witch's magic steal Mira away from Drake? Reunite him with the Ice Queen? At what cost?* This night could not have gone more wrong. He stood and turned to Rey, "I'm sorry, I never should have imposed on your hospitality like this. I'll find my own way back upstairs."

Aurra stood. "Wait. I can't help you find what's hidden. But I know who can."

"I already know that Mira and Veridia can help me. Is there another?"

She nodded. "It's an indirect approach to finding something but it could work. Marie is an expert in foretelling future events. She might not be able to give you exact details on the location of what you seek, but I'm sure she could tell you where your friends will need to be to start looking."

Less' eyes flicked to Rey and back. "Sounds costly."

"I could ask her," Rey replied. "Prices often vary upon what is required, and who is doing the asking."

"Do you need me?" asked Less.

"I think I can handle this on my own." Rey relaxed back in her chair. Whatever was going on in Less' head, whatever these personal projects were, mention of it riled the normally implacable Winter King up. She wanted - and needed - to know what it was. She thought more about what he'd said. His mission, not our mission. Curious.

"I'll see you tomorrow then. Good night, Aurra. Thank you for your cooperation." He went back upstairs and found a corner he could disappear into. He wrapped Winter's mantle around him for comfort and watched the exhibitionists unnoticed. He brooded about how the night had unravelled completely, his plans seemingly unworkable. He waited until Mira and Drake had returned, were ready to leave, and had searched for him for some time before revealing himself.

Mira could hardly wait to take advantage of the brief period of time she had alone with Drake. The pledge she'd made to Less about sticking together until they found the Key was something she was discovering weighed on her a good deal.

Yet it wasn't just the Pledge that weighed on her conscience. It was the fact she knew something terrible that had escaped from the Hedge was harming people, and she might be the only one who could track it. What right did she have to enjoy herself when people might be dying?

Guilt was becoming a frequent visitor to her soul. She was also feeling guilty about letting

her passions overrule her brain and having sex with Remy. Worse, she couldn't risk telling Drake about it for fear he'd leave her over it. She couldn't stand that thought, either.

These things all drove her to imbibe a little more than she should, to find an alcoholic escape from those emotions and simply abandon her guilt and her responsibilities for the passion of the moment. She let her body be her guide since her mind would only torment her.

She took time to admire Drake's muscular, proportioned body as they wound their way through the crowd and up the stairs at the back of the main floor. She didn't want to make any more decisions tonight since she was pretty sure that she'd make the wrong one, so she had left it up to Drake which room to explore.

He led her past the couples (and triples and quartets) having sex in the open to the far end of the second floor, and into a room decorated like a Victorian boudoir. Closing the door behind them, he leaned against it and watched Mira. He had until morning to spend with her, before he had to leave to deal with the odd request he'd received from his king. For all his knowledge and expertise in the Hedge, he'd never been sent so far from the Duchy to deal with a threat. Briar wolves, he thought, were something more suitable for the current Magister of Nightmares to deal with, but he would follow his orders.

Knowing he would be gone for a while, he wanted to spend as much time as possible with Mira, for he had missed her. He wanted to head into the Hedge with the taste of her on his lips, and the warmth of her body still on his body. Perhaps after a short time here at the club, they could go back to her place. He could use the trod behind her building to enter the Hedge and meet up with Teara and head out.

Drake smiled at Mira and waited to see what she would do, how she wanted to start.

She looked at him hungrily for a moment, then jumped into his arms and wrapped her legs around his waist. She clung to him as if she were drowning. Around her kisses she whispered, *"I want you, I want you,"* over and over again.

The motion and sudden energy of her passionate attack tore the edge of her dress where it hadn't slid up her hip fast enough, but she hardly paid it any attention. It was replaceable and lately, time with Drake was not.

His hands slid around under her rear to help support her as he pushed away from the door. Rather than carry her to the bed, he knelt down in front of the chaise and gently set her down on the cushions. Drake released her and pulled back enough to be able to see her face.

He cupped her cheeks with his hands and his eyes searched hers for a moment. He must have been satisfied with what he saw because his lips covered hers.

Drake's kiss was filled with restrained hunger as his tongue fenced with hers, his hands still

gently holding her face.

It was a real kiss, one filled with passion and warmth, not just heat and lust. She realized in a heady rush just how different and good it could be with Drake. She lost herself in the moment for a time, exploring his mouth as he explored hers.

When they parted for a moment, she gasped, *"You don't have to hold back with me. I won't."*

"I want more than a quick hard fuck," Drake whispered in response, "even if the drink I got you was a Fuck Me Rough. I want to explore you and be explored. This isn't about me or you. This is about *us*." He slid his right hand into her hair and played with it, enjoying the feel of it, while his left hand cupped the back of her head, just above her neck. "You deserve to be cherished, not just the object of a wild rut."

Mira slowed down a little as she realized something. Up until now, rutting was pretty much exactly what one might call her own intimate experiences. She could feel his affection not just in the way he was looking at her, but also in the way he held her and sensed that what he was talking about was something more than she'd experienced before.

It was a struggle for her to wrap her mind around it. The *us* he mentioned called to her spirit and it made a part of her rejoice in a way she didn't understand. *"About... us?"* She rolled the thought around in her mind. Why did this seem important? She knew it was, but didn't quite get it. It had something to do with how she loved the way he was holding her and looking at her right now. Her uncertainty showed on her face. *"I don't know what you mean by 'cherished'."*

"You are not just an object for someone's pleasure, and you shouldn't be treated that way. This should be about taking joy in each other. An appreciation of each other beyond lust. Sex doesn't have to be just about who hard, how fast, and how often we can get off. It should be mutual seduction." He stroked her cheek. "Enjoyment of each other that just goes beyond physical gratification."

Her hand reflected his gesture, fingers touching his cheek and tracing his strong jawline. *"I think I understand what you are saying. To show appreciation for the person you are, not just the body you have. To do this for each other at the same time. It sounds... beautiful."*

Drake nodded. "It can be." He brushed his lips across hers and kissed the corner of her mouth. "Is it something you'd like to try?"

"Well, I'm not seeing a lot of examples of what you are talking about going on in this place, but I'd like to give it a try with you." She honestly felt like it was something she wouldn't be interested in trying with anyone else. *"I do cherish this time we have together. I will try to show you how excited I feel when I get a chance to have a night with you, and how I appreciate you, but I don't want you to be disappointed. Thinking of you makes me*

very... excited. I don't want you to think it's just because I'm looking for sex. Which I am, but I think I'm looking for more, too."

Drake's response was to kiss her again as he had before, but this time there was an obvious invitation to follow his lead. She did, returning his kiss and holding him.

He deepened the kiss ever so slightly and ran his fingers through her hair, caressing her the back of her head and neck, content to let her hands do as they wished. She kept one hand at the back of his neck as well, but the other wandered around to his chest, found a nipple and though it was through his shirt, gently stroked it in little circles. It hardened under her touch and she could feel him smile against her lips.

He slid his mouth along her jaw, covering it with gentle kisses as he worked his way toward her ear. He took her earlobe between his teeth and gave it a playful little tug while his hands swept down her back to rest on her hips.

Mira sighed luxuriously in response to the gentle tugs on her ear. She arched her back, brushing the tips of her breasts along his chest a couple times before she hugged him tightly. She let her weight drag against him a little, not pulling him, but showing him she would enjoy him lying across her, too.

Drake let her guide him down as she lay backwards, but stopped short of resting on top of her. Instead, his hands glided slowly up from her hips to cup her breasts. His thumbs lazily circled her nipples and brushed them with a teasingly light touch.

She wanted to feel his skin. She unbuttoned his shirt and pushed it back out of the way, then pulled up his undershirt, but left it up to him to take it off or not.

He let her explore as he kissed his way down the side of her neck and across her collar bone. He continued down the bared expanse of her skin, until he reached the valley between her breasts. There he paused, taking his time expressing his appreciation of her.

She scooted a little, making her dress give herself room to maneuver, then drew the smooth, soft flesh of the calf of her leg across the outside of his thigh and rump. She pushed the shirt further out of her way and then raised up to give a nipple a teasing lick when he paused to look at her.

"Shall I continue," he asked with a smile, "or give you a chance to catch up, or even get a bit ahead of me?"

She bit her lip coyly then pulled the bottom of his undershirt over his head by way of answer. While he removed it, she attacked the button and zipper of his pants and pushed those down, too, underwear and all.

"Shoes on or off?" One look told Mira Drake was not yet completely aroused.

"No shoes," she replied. *"Let me do that."* She stood up and swapped positions with him, letting him relax onto the reclining chair. She then straddled him, kissing him on the lips deeply for a moment, before sliding sensuously down his body until she was kneeling on the floor. Then she pulled off each boot and put them aside. His socks followed, and then she was kissing her way up his thigh. She paused at the sensitive place where his leg joined his pelvis. She ran a warm tongue along the slight groove as she ran her hands along the sides of his body.

Drake made a little noise of pleasure and played with her hair, twirling one lock around his finger. She locked eyes with him, and then they both understood it was time to let their bodies take control for a while.

Mira proved to him she was a capable and attentive lover. She took the time to arouse him and to appreciate his body. She moved with him, but moved against him, too, when she needed.

Exploring his body became an adventure. Unlike other women he'd been with, she was interested in every part of him, treating him like a mystery she wanted to unravel and savor. At the same time, she didn't just let him discover her. She showed him what things she enjoyed. She didn't force him to guess.

Drake was an attentive student and teacher, teaching Mira what he liked. He made sure to learn everything he could, and found delight - both for himself and Mira - in his own explorations.

Hours later, sated and exhausted, the couple lay for a while in each other's arms. Finally motivated to move again by the nature of their surroundings, they realized it was time to go, that this place no longer held the heady allure brought on by their mutual lust.

When Drake asked, Mira happily extended an invitation to stay with her at the apartment, at least until the next day when they both had their own missions to attend.

Drake and Mira returned from their adventure upstairs and spent a while looking for Less. Just when Mira was about to give up and go look outside, Less allowed them to notice him.

She gave Less a cheery smile and looped her arm in his as well as Drake. Mira's happy and contented mood was infectious, and each of the men were likewise quiet as they left, for their own reasons. They left the club to find Drake's car in the parking garage he'd had to use because space was so limited when they'd arrived.

It was still busy here. Couples and small groups wandered up and down the sidewalks. A few hookers plied their trade near Blood Tears in hopes of some pickup business with those unlucky enough (or just that horny) to have not been sated at the club. Cops were often notified by the club when these sex workers were in the neighborhood, and run off,

but like roaches there were always more of them willing to creep back to ply their trade.

The trio wound their way past them and around knots of club-goers to the street corner across from the parking garage. At the signal, they crossed the street, still arm in arm with Mira.

Half way there, Mira convulsed and she gasped. She looked as startled and surprised at both Drake and Less were. Then her legs gave way as she convulsed hard enough to be lose strength. She choked silently, then her mouth opened wide in a scream as she collapsed completely, hands slipping from Drake and Less and she fell to all fours on the pavement in the crosswalk.

Less and then heard the worst possible thing they could think of. A car's engine, revving to accelerate bore down on them from across the intersection. Instinct told them it was coming straight at the three of them, but there was no time to look. They only had a split second to act.

Less raised his umbrella and thumbed the spring-loaded mechanism with a thumb as he grabbed Mira's arm. Even as he commanded the air to provide him with a gusty lift, he instinctively tapped into hidden reserves of strength and they shot into the air.

Drake had heard the oncoming car at the same time and shoved Mira just as Less was launching. His own self-preservation instinct kicked in and he threw himself to the side as the car roared past.

Screams and slightly belated shouts of "Look out!" rose from pedestrian onlookers, the turned into startled gasps as the mortals witnessed Less and Mira's shocking rise into the air.

The car swerved toward the sidewalk and screeched to a halt. Before it was even stopped, the passenger side door flew open and a young woman dressed like a hooker tumbled to the pavement.

The car revved and roared away, but not before Less saw the driver look at him through the rearview mirror, make a gun sign with his fingers pointed at he and Mira.

Drake was nearest the young woman who'd been so violently ejected. He saw a lot of blood already spreading from her all over the sidewalk. The Summer warrior ran over to the woman anyway to see if there might be something he could do to help her. "Call 9-1-1!" he shouted out. That got some the gaping pedestrians moving. Blood was running rapidly from her groin, already soaking her orange miniskirt. She was a mess and all she could do was give Drake a pleading look before she lost consciousness.

Less landed immediately at the side of the road and laid Mira gently down on the sidewalk. His concern was for Mira - she had been choking! He would worry about mortal witnesses and wounded prostitutes after he had assessed her health. Mira

continued to have trouble breathing even as she writhed on the sidewalk. She curled up and shuddered. As the car sped away, she took a shaky gasp and then lost consciousness -- but at least she was breathing again.

He glanced around as he kneeled over her. There would soon be police and paramedics, perhaps awkward questions. *Where was Rey? Still inside or gone home to Richard?* What he wanted to do was flee. Get Mira back to her pond and get some goblin fruit into her. But the choking had to have been magic of some kind and the witches in the club might be able to do something about it.

Someone was dialing 911 on his cell phone while a woman claiming to be a nurse came to help Drake. The scattered small groups of people were divided between what was going on with the dying prostitute and whatever was going on with Mira. Less could tell that soon, there'd be a curious crowd around both of them if things didn't change quickly. A few were still staring in shock at Less and his umbrella.

Less suddenly remembered that Rey had left earlier in the evening. Time to go. He made a few changes to his Mask before he looked up again. "Make way, please. She's had quite a shock. I need to get her home." He collapsed his umbrella and gathered Mira into his arms. As quick as he could, burdened as he was, he went into the parking garage to find a secluded spot. He would open a ritual door to his Hollow, and from there get to the Motley's Hollow.

Drake heard Less and saw them leave, but he couldn't leave the injured woman until the paramedics arrived. He'd meet them at Mira's apartment later.

Less managed to avoid answering questions about his unconscious companion and amazing umbrella as he left, and the crowd soon forgot about him as attention was drawn toward CPR attempts on the bleeding woman. Once he was out of sight, he worked his ritual, found his way to his own Hollow, and then made his way to the motley Hollow. Mira did not awaken the entire trip back.

It gave him time to think about what had happened. Something was bothering him, like an itch at the back of his mind and it wasn't until he set foot in the motley hollow that he realized what it was. The pledge that bound he and Mira together until they found the Black Key was no longer there.

Which could mean only one thing...

Less waded into the pond and lay Mira down on the submerged ledge. Only her face and breasts broke the surface. He remained there watching her for a few moments. *The Black Key had been found.* He went into the house to find Aurelia and some goblin fruit. He sent the sprite out with the fruit to care for Mira and sat at the rough thornwood table. He put his head in his hands to try to process the night.

Mira and Drake clearly loved each other, and Drake wasn't as straight-laced as Less had

originally pegged him to be. No mere dream-suggestion or fear of monogamy was going to drive a wedge her and Drake's sexual thrill-ride. And Rey! If she hadn't been there, the witch could have satisfied his soul's desire! He hadn't dared reveal his hand in front of her. Not yet. And how could he justify invading Mira's dreams when he could barely tolerate the mere suggestion of delving into his own secrets? Except that his secrets were the Duchy's secrets. And Mira needed genuine help with her secrets...

Less was disturbed from his thoughts by the sound of an opening door. "Less?" called Mira.

She entered the room and sat down at the table. "*Aurelia said you brought me here. What happened? Is it still the same night?*" Her pet otter danced around her feet, then climbed up and encircled her neck, playfully poking his nose into her chin and ear. It tickled, but she ignored it in favor of listening to Less's answer.

Less tried not to stare at her dripping wet form but his eyes were not all under his direct control. The fabric sheath she dared call a dress clung to every curve and it was apparent that her undergarments had been abandoned sometime during the evening. "It is," Less confirmed. "How are you feeling? You suddenly started choking and collapsed. Then some guy deliberately tried to run us over in his car. Drake is dealing with the consequences of that right now." He watched her in expectation. He wanted to exclaim on their satisfied Pledge but desperately wanted to hear her side of the events.

Mira actually blushed in embarrassment and shame. "*I think I'm okay. I... wasn't choking exactly. It felt... it felt like...*" She swallowed hard and shook her head, then took a calming breath. "*Drake! I need to get home. I promised him he could stay with me because he's going away on a mission for his king and he doesn't know how long he will be gone. I think it might be dangerous, though he hasn't said what it is.*" She clearly didn't want to think of anything bad happening to him, but she also clearly was worried.

Less tried to calm her down. He reached across the table and touched her arm. "I'll get you home soon. Drake will be very busy answering questions, he won't be able to get away for quite a while. This is important, Mira, can you see that our Pledge has been satisfied? What did you feel like when you were choking?"

Mira blinked. "*You're right. The pledge is gone!*" She thought about that a moment and seemed to come to the same conclusion Less had. "*What I felt? It felt like my body was out of control. Something happened to me and I couldn't stop it. The harder I tried to get it to stop, the worse it got. It was like I was... like I was raped.*" She couldn't put it in words, couldn't tell him that at first it felt good, like she had an orgasm, but when she tried to resist, it turned into horrible pain that eventually overwhelmed her. But her expression told him enough.

"*You think it was the Black Key?*"

"What else could it be?" *Raped by the Black Key!* An image of the wounded sex worker flashed in his mind. "There was another woman. A prostitute was thrown from the car

that tried to kill us. She was bleeding from the groin. We should talk to Drake about her. He tried to help her while we made our escape. The question I have is: Are you now the *Eochair Dubh*? Or was it simply in the car? Can you detect the Key now?"

"I have no idea the answer to any of those questions," Mira said. Thinking of calling him made her realize something was missing. "Did you pick up my purse? It had my ID and new phone in it."

"No, I'm sorry. I didn't even think about your purse after the car drove at us. Mortals saw us float down on my umbrella, I just wanted to get you out of there. Can you look at yourself with your magic sight and tell if you've somehow become the Key?"

She frowned as she puzzled over that, then snagged the neckline of her soggy dress with a finger and looked inside. She eyed herself, then said, "I think I'm still me and nothing extra." She looked back at Less. "I'm not really sure how I'm supposed to... wait a second. How come you weren't affected like I was?"

Less frowned as he thought about it.

"If you weren't affected, and neither was Drake then... what the hell does that mean?"

"It's quite possible that the man in the car had the Key. He was trying to kill you. Maybe what he did to that prostitute he magically inflicted upon you. Whether that's because you can see the Key for what it is or because he has some personal agenda against you, I have no idea. Let's get back to your apartment and wait for Drake."

The line of thinking led Mira down some pretty dark paths. She didn't voice them because right now they were just fears. Saying it aloud seemed like it would only make them more real.

Mira nodded. She left the Hollow with Less, letting him lead her back on the paths that would lead to the Gate near her apartment building.

It was a long walk but in time they found their way into the Santa Fe Gate and entered lobby of her fancy apartment building. Less appeared dapper as always, but Mira was a mess. Her dress was a sodden shambles and she'd forgotten her shoes at the bottom of the pond in the Hollow. The elderly night guard gave her a long, concerned look, but he'd long ago ceased asking questions of this particular tenant. He simply told her that she'd had a caller, the same young man as earlier this evening, but that her roommate had allowed him up. Mira realized that Drake had already arrived.

After making their way via elevator up to the eleventh floor and into her apartment, Mira was feeling decidedly run-down. Drake and Amber were sitting at the table talking over cups of coffee. The look of relief on Amber's face was obvious when Mira and Less walked in.

Amber took Mira immediately upstairs and had her put on something dry and warm,

"Something to help you feel more human," she'd told Mira, "and less like the world had just fallen on you."

Mira returned a few minutes later, giving Less time to fix himself a cup of tea. Either Amber had a sharp insight, or Mira had said something to her, because she excused herself and went to her rooms, leaving Drake, Less and Mira to have a more private conversation.

Drake silently held his arms out to Mira. She went to him and embraced him, resting her head on his chest.

"Are you okay?" he asked, resting his cheek on the top of her head, his arms wrapped around her and holding her close.

"Yes," she affirmed. "*Just worried.*" She stood there letting his strength buoy her. Finally, she let go to ask a question. "*Do you guys think it's possible this Key is... alive somehow?*"

"I have been entertaining that idea," said Less.

"I wish I could help," Drake said.

"Tell us about the woman who was thrown from the car," said Less.

"She never regained consciousness," Drake replied. "When the EMT's arrived, I left. I grabbed your purse, Mira, when I saw it on the ground. It's on the counter in the kitchen."

"What had been done to her?" asked Less.

"She was raped," Drake said bluntly, "with something hard and jagged. She died there, on the sidewalk. Bled out. There was nothing that could be done to save her." He shook his head angrily. "I'm being sent to see if there are briar wolves on the Duchy's borders, when I should be here, helping you find the Key and stop these murders."

Less decided not to address his frustrations. "Did you get a look at the car or driver at all?"

"Other than the fact he seemed to be specifically aiming at the two of you? Clean shaven, brown hair, almost the same color as the Lincoln he was driving." Drake shook his head. "I don't know the model year, so don't ask. I'm not a car guy."

Mira stood in front of Drake, turned so her back touched him, and drew his arms around herself for comfort. "*Thank you for rescuing my purse,*" she said. "*Less, do you know where Rey went? Maybe we should call her and tell her what happened. For all we know, she could be in danger, too. If the Key is aware somehow, maybe it knows we are hunting it and will go after her, too.*"

"I left her talking to Ishtar's witches but I saw her leave the club a couple of hours ago. I figured she went home. We had arranged for her to meet us tomorrow morning here."

Less had only gotten a good look at the top of the car as he sailed turbulently over it. He hoped the police had coaxed a plate number from one of the witnesses. Worm could probably get that information, but Less already felt it wouldn't do any good. "The attack puzzles me. I imagined the Gates like a force of nature, an Other forcing it's way into reality. But an assassin in a speeding car means there is more at work here. Unless it was unrelated and we're dealing with Leopold's vampire crew again, but the fact the Key was present suggests otherwise."

"How do you suppose the dragon we faced factors into all this? Or do you think it's more of a symptom of the problem rather than really a part of it?"

"That's a very good question. There is still the brother out there. I thought it just happened to be one of the first things through the Gate. The dragon we met didn't seem aware enough to be able to get agents but maybe his brother is different, or has grown. A vanguard to prepare for the arrival of the Other. Do we go under Iron Mountain to find out?"

"I don't know," Mira admitted.

"Then I suggest we try to get some sleep. We can discuss this with Rey in the morning. She might have something to add."

He didn't have to say that twice to Mira. She was exhausted and ready to fall asleep on her feet. But she didn't want to go to bed as she was. *"Good idea. I need to hop into my bath first."* She turned to Drake and smiled. *"And you can feel free to use any bathroom you like, Mister, but I expect to see you in my room tonight."* He knew that, but she liked saying it.

Drake chuckled. "Good night, Less," he said, following Mira up the stairs to her bedroom. It turned out he wanted to share her bath, to which she had absolutely no objections. After a relaxing massage, they retired for what was left of the night.

Less slept as well. Too many late nights had taken a toll on him and he was bone weary now.

"So that's what's going on," Rey said finally. She'd arrived at Marie's double-wide trailer around midnight and explained what was going on with the Key, and how the motley needed to find it before things got worse. "Will you help me?"

"Course I will," Marie said with a reassuring smile. She pushed back her cushy rolling chair from the kitchen table to peruse a bookcase standing along the wall of the adjacent living room. She picked up a rectangular box-shaped thing wrapped in black material and brought it back to the table.

"Now this is something I'd do for anyone. Let's start with this and see where it leads us, then we can see how else I might be able to help you." She unwrapped the item, revealing a deck of tarot cards. She began shuffling them herself; her rule was that a real witch never let anyone else touch her deck. Messed with the energy.

"Okay," she said as she continued to shuffle. "Let's start with three questions about this. I'll give you yes or no answers, so make them count."

Rey nodded. "Is someone or something entering our world whenever someone dies when the Key is nearby?"

Marie flipped a card. It was reversed, turned upside down. She shook her head. "No."

Rey thought for a moment, then asked "Is the Black Key sentient?"

Marie flipped another card. It was right side up. "Yes."

Rey considered that answer, and it helped her formulate the third and final question. "Does the Key choose its targets deliberately?" (Basically, does it choose a specific target rather than whoever is convenient?)

Marie drew another card, but it flew from her fingers. It fluttered to the floor and she stared at it. "I don't get a yes or no answer from that question," she said.

"Curious," Rey said. "Is that considered to be my third question?"

"Afraid so," Marie replied.

"No problem," Rey said easily. "I had to ask, just in case. The answers you were able to give me were helpful. Now, we just need to find the Key."

"I can help with that," Marie said. "I would just need something connected to the Black Key. Like someone or something that has been in contact with it. Or maybe a picture?"

"I might be able to get something that belonged to one of its victims," Rey said. "Less has seen it, I think, and Mira can detect it. Would any of those be suitable?"

"I think any of them might work," Marie replied.

"Cool," Rey said, fighting back a huge yawn. "I'll call them in the morning and then we can meet up with you again." This time, the yawn couldn't be stopped. "Do you mind if I crash here tonight? I'm nearly asleep on my feet."

"No problem, sis." Her couch folded out and Marie liked company.

Drake had risen just before 8 am so he could meet Teara and go on the mission for his king. Mira woke at that time to say goodbye and give him a kiss for luck on his hunt. She went back to sleep.

It was a little while later that Less was roused by the buzzing intercom. Security wanted to send Rey up to the room. Less told security to let Rey in and put the kettle on. He went upstairs to rouse Mira before returning downstairs to meet Rey at the door.

She answered his knock on her bedroom door and a moment later shuffled out dressed in just a fluffy blue robe and matching dolphin slippers that Amber had acquired for her thinking they were cute. She followed Less down and plopped into a chair at the table, still looking half-asleep.

Amber must have heard the buzzer too because she appeared about then, already dressed for the day. With a cheery wave, she said she'd get the door when Rey knocked.

Less set about making breakfast. He had been staying at the apartment for over a week and knew his way around. He started frying up eggs and slicing hedge fruits. "Morning Rey," he said when Rey arrived. "Coffee'll be a minute. Care for some food?"

Mira waved and smiled at Rey, then raised her hand for food like she was in school.

"No thanks," Rey replied. "I ate at Marie's. How'd things go after we parted ways last night?"

"I had a wonderful date with Drake!" Mira said with a dreamy smile. But then her face clouded. *"But a hooker was murdered and I got raped by the Key on the way home, so that part sucked. How was your evening?"*

Less filled in the salient details of the attempt on Mira's life and the conclusion of their Pledge. "So, we wonder if Mira is now somehow the Key, or if the Key was merely in the car with the assassin."

"More likely the latter," Rey replied, and told them of Marie's divination and the answers she'd received.

"But the Black Key is sentient. Interesting. What do you make of the attack on Mira? What are the Gate and the Key that they would have car-driving assassins?"

"I don't think they have assassins per se," Rey said, taking a moment to think about how to phrase her answer. "And I have no information about the Gate yet. But it is the Key that is going around killing people. But are you sure it was Mira the Key was after, and not the three of you?"

"Hey, good point," Mira added. *"Less has been hunting it the longest. Maybe it realized that and wants to get you, too? Maybe I got targeted just to slow you down so it could line you up for a shot. I'm a lot easier to spot than you are anyway..."*

Less just couldn't imagine Mira not being the target. She was *always* the target. "I still think something is odd about the assassin. When the Key targets someone, their emotions and vices are ramped up to the breaking point. There is nothing rational going on when you eat yourself to death or kill someone over tomatoes. Who in the mortal world could want the Gates to remain open to act in such a way?"

"That's a good question. No one would. So, this thing removes rationality from it's victims, spins them up and let's them go. Another good question from a Fae perspective is is "why not?", rather than "why". Keepers are the opposite of everything people are supposed to be. If the Key is a tool or toy of the Fae Lords, and it is sentient then it might act just like its true master."

"Why are you calling the person who tried to run you guys over an assassin?" Rey asked. "It's not the same person mortal doing all the killing. Is it?"

"I'm calling him an assassin because he deliberately, methodically tried to kill us with the car. If the Key acts like its Fae Lord, then the Fae Lord loves chaos. Who could a Fae Lord get to act for it in the mortal world. Most likely a Loyalist changeling, I would guess."

"Didn't the woman from the bus kill herself in the grocery store, and then a different woman picked the purse up? And it was a man driving the car. It could be the Key is controlling mortals," Rey suggested.

"Yes," agreed Less. "I think the Key is absolutely controlling mortals, but that control seems to be limited to a fatal over-indulgence of negative emotions. The assassin was not out of control. I don't think he fits the pattern." Less didn't think they were getting very far on this line of thought so he introduced the other item Mira had mentioned the night before. "Last night Mira reminded me about the dragon that is still loose in the mortal world. Do you think this dragon could be a player in all of this? Based on our encounter with the brother, I'm not inclined to think that it had much ability to interact with mortal society, but it could be different with this one. Dare we seek it out to find out?"

"I don't think the dragon we met is involved with the Key," Rey said with a brief shake of her head. "He's here, glad to be here and doesn't want to go back. But why do you think it would have problems interacting with mortals?"

"Well, either way," Mira put in, "I think that's another issue entirely. After thinking about it, Less, I'm not inclined to think that the dragons' goals and the Key's goals are the same. So, I'd suggest we just focus on one thing at a time. I'm not sure I'm up to handling this Key and another dragon at the same time."

Less nodded. "Agreed. We leave the dragon well enough alone. That is a relief! But we're not that much further ahead. I'll try to track down the car involved in the incident last night but without a clear motive we still have no way of determining where the Key will be next. We can only wait until it strikes again and be prepared."

"I'm a little worried that the Key will find us instead." She smiled. *"But I won't stick my head in the sand."*

"We don't need to wait," Rey said. "Marie said she could find out where it is, if she had someone who had contact with the Key. I think either of you would work."

"Well, that *is* good news!" said Less as he served up breakfast and hot coffee. "Can we go straight over after breakfast?"

"Okay," Mira said. *"Should we talk about what to do if we find it? I'm more than a little nervous -- scratch that. I'm terrified of that thing. How am I supposed to resist it when it uses my own body against me? How do we prevent it from taking people over at all?"*

"I honestly don't know yet," Rey admitted. "It seems to try and take advantage of our weaknesses. Since we are now aware of that, it might help us resist it. But we do need protection, and a way to contain it."

"Can we get some kind of warding like the witches put on this apartment?" asked Less.

"Anything is possible," Rey said, "but the ward must be specific. We have to know exactly what we want to be defended against. And wards are very, very expensive."

Mira nodded. *"I think Rey is right about that. Also, wards aren't fool proof. They are speed bumps, really, not walls. If they were, neither you nor Rey could walk into this apartment, which I have warded against fae and fae-touched beings. You would only feel it if you tried to harm me."*

"I guess we should consult with the witches, then," said Less. "I am willing to pay to keep a True Fae, in its true form, from passing through the Gates. Maybe they can take away our emotions for a short time."

"There is something else they might be able to do," Rey added, "that's likely not quite so expensive. A shield that provides protection from non-physical attacks. They can be made to last about a day long."

"So, assuming we do capture the Key and we can't kill it, we'll need to put it somewhere, a warded box perhaps, to prevent it from affecting people."

"Most likely," Rey said with a nod. "But we'd still need to figure out how it's controlling people - if that is indeed what it is doing - before we get the ward cast." She grimaced slightly. "The Key is sentient, and the idea of locking it away doesn't sit well with me."

What if it's a being, and not a bag or something?"

"Then it's an evil being and deserves no better than every other supernatural predator we've dealt with," Mira stated without hesitation.

"I agree with Mira," said Less. "The Gates threaten the very existence of the mortal world. The Key must be dealt with in any way necessary. As to the nature of the Key's powers, the Key must be Fae in nature to be connected to Gates to Arcadia. It is probably using some sort of Fae magic to affect people. The witches might be able to confirm that with one of their yes/no questions."

Mira blinked and said, *"Of course! You are absolutely right, Less. Let's go say hello to Marie."*

"Why don't I call her to give her the head's up while you get dressed," Rey said with a nod.

Mira did exactly that while Rey warned Marie they would be stopping in soon. After that, the motley piled into Rey's care and made the journey north to Marie's double-wide. She was waiting for them when they arrived. Tea was already made, but she gave those brave enough to have an early morning drink an option of wine or scotch.

Mira volunteered for a glass of wine, then wandered around looking at the eclectic assortment of nicknacks on Marie's shelves.

Less accepted a cup of tea and held it for the comforting warmth. "We think the Black Key, or one of its agents, attempted to kill us last night. If we are to stop it from destroying Reality, we will need protection from it and some way to contain it."

"Not me," Rey added. "Less, Mira and Mira's boyfriend, Drake."

Marie frowned. "Well, I rather thought that you had access to powers much greater than that of witches. I'm willing to try, but I can't offer any guarantees. What you are talking about is leagues beyond what I'm used to dealing with."

"I understand that," Rey said with a smile, "but none of the three of us have much in the way of protections, like shields could provide."

Marie nodded. "Let me look into what I might need for a little bit." She headed to a back room where her more important references were stored.

Once Marie was out of sight, Rey turned to Less and said "She's not the one to be asking about Wards. That's Aurra's specialty. And she's right. We can do far more with our own resources to control the Key than any witch could provide."

"Okay. Let's find out more about the nature of the Key."

Marie returned with a faded, leather-bound journal in hand, as well as some kind of orb with a blue satin cloth draped over it. She went to the little kitchen table and set her things there before taking a seat. She invited her guests to join her.

Less sat, fidgeting self-consciously in the anticipation of this unfamiliar magic. "Is this where we get to ask you three yes or no questions?"

"You can," Marie said, "and so can Mira. I'm afraid I won't get accurate answers if Rey asks again so soon after doing this once already for her. They do need to be quite specific and not subjective. Looking for facts will get you the best results."

"Alright," said Less. His eyes glanced around nervously at everyone at the table. "My first question is: does the *Eochair Dubh* use Fae magic?"

Marie picked up her deck of tarot cards, which also near at hand. She shuffled them while considering the question, then drew the top card. It seemed to escape her fingers and landed on the table face down. Marie frowned in surprise, then put the card back in the deck without looking at it.

"I'm sorry, Less. That question has no simple yes or no answer. Perhaps it means it sometimes does and sometimes does not use fae magic. Or perhaps the meaning of 'fae magic' is too subjective. What you call fae magic may not be exactly what it has, but it might be something you could mistake for that. Whatever the real answer is, this simple reading cannot clarify it for you. Do you have another question?"

"Oh dear," said Less. This was a disturbing revelation. He wondered if Ishtar's magic was truly Fae, or if by becoming a god-creature it had changed somewhat. "Um, was the man in the car who tried to kill us last night the *Eochair Dubh*?"

She flipped another card over. It was upside down. "No, he was not," she interpreted.

His last question. He had so much he wanted to know but the answers were so limited it would take him a hundred questions to narrow down an exact response. He sighed and posed a general question, "Is it possible to protect ourselves against being controlled by the *Eochair Dubh*?"

"Wait." Mira spoke before Marie could draw a card. "*That might be too broad. We might not get a yes or no on that because there may be things that some people can do to protect themselves that others can't do.*"

Marie agreed. "I think she's right. Can you narrow that down to something more specific? Then we can move on to trying to locate this thing." She nodded to the orb covered by satin.

"I guess I don't have enough occult knowledge to be the right person to ask these

questions," said Less. "How about this? Can the witches in Mythic City provide wards that will protect changelings against being controlled by the *Eochair Dubh*?"

"That's a good question," Marie agreed. She turned another card and it was right side up. "Yes." She looked a little surprised at the answer and also hopeful.

Mira came to sit down at the table, too. "*Okay. First question. Was the Black Key controlling the driver of the car that tried to run Drake, Less and I down last night?*"

Marie looked at Mira, but shuffled the cards, then drew an answer. "Yes."

"Marie, I'd like to know what happened to me last night. Just before the car almost ran us over, I felt like something had gotten inside me somehow. I tried to fight it but it became extremely painful and I collapsed."

Marie asked, "You mean, something was trying to get in your mind?"

Mira shook her head, then hesitated. "*Well, it all could have just been in my head. But it felt physical.*"

Marie's eyes grew large with alarm. "Oh! Are you --"

Mira waved off her concern. "*I'm fine. Just worried that I might collapse every time this thing is around.*"

Marie thought about it, then offered, "I hesitate to suggest this because it will go against your every instinct but... what if you didn't resist? You could ask if that might help."

"So the question is... I got it. If I don't try to resist whatever the Key is trying to do next time, will I better be able to handle being close to it?"

Marie flipped a card. "Yes."

"I'm still not sure that's a good idea. I don't want anything influencing me or taking me over. Okay, I have a question for you. Marie, I know the wards witches set up aren't foolproof. They are meant help solve a problem, not be the solution itself."

"Sounds like you've learned a thing or two from Aurra, but yes. That's right," Marie said.

"Do you know who could help with wards like that? Is it just Aurra?"

"She's the one to see about wards. But understand that wards are static. If you want to protect yourselves, then you want shields, and those are things most of us excel in. Aurra, Yvonne and I especially. Shields are also quite temporary."

"How come?"

"Because attaching a spell to a person that moves around a lot is much harder than imbuing a location with magic that will stick around for the long term."

"I know items can be enchanted to contain spells. Will one of you do something like that in exchange for something?"

"No. I'm sorry, hon. We can do something like that, but we just will not do something like that for you. We made a decision long ago that we would never create something like that because it can far too easily fall into the wrong hands and be used against us. Witches in our coven may make whatever they want for themselves. They'd be responsible for it. But giving them away for any reason is a strict no-no. Besides, it takes a hell of a lot out of us to make even one such enchanted item."

"So if we want a shield, we have to come to one of you and have the spell cast on us any time we want it."

Marie nodded.

"Okay, my final question for the cards to answer. We know that the Key can take people over. We know it tried to do something to me and then kill me and my friends. Maybe I was purely randomly selected to be attacked by the Key while its host ran down my companions, but I'm not sure. So, my question is am I special to the Key in some way?"

Marie drew a card. It flew from her fingers and slapped the table, hard, making Marie and Mira both jump. It landed face up to reveal the queen of cups. Marie stared at it. "Yes."

And then the card frosted over.

Marie looked at Mira and then shoved away from the table, immediately angry. "What the fuck! Just what the hell do you think you are doing? I'm trying to help you here and you pull this shit!"

Marie stormed from the kitchen in a rage. Mira sat helpless looking confused. "But... I didn't." She looked at Rey and Less. "I didn't do that. I swear!"

Less just clenched his many sets of teeth. He knew only one other person invested in this whole Arcadian Gate and Key affair that would raise frost on a card. His Queen of the frozen kingdom. She had been silent of late but she had warned him to keep Mira close, and by inference, safe. He had been wondering if her command to seek the Black Key had been to facilitate her, the whole and true Other her, coming through the Gate. But now he wondered if she wanted to ensure the closing of the Gate. The Key clearly wanted to keep the Gate open and was actively hunting Mira to prevent her from getting in the way of that. Was the Ice Queen trying to protect Mira so that she could help close the Gate? The cynical side of Less simply countered with the argument that by asking Less to keep Mira close by, she would be able to more easily target her. It was a storm of

unknowns when it came to the True Fae.

"I know," Rey said softly, and got up from the table. "Just... stay here." She followed Marie out of the kitchen.

Marie angrily paced back and forth in her bedroom. "Look, Rey, I know they are your friends and all, but you can't expect me to deal with people who don't take what I do seriously or treat it with respect."

"Mira's a sorceress," Rey said gently, using her most persuasive tones, "and our stock and trade is magic and the occult. I promise you, she respects what you do. She would never knowingly mess with your things."

"Who else could it be? Seleman?"

Rey shook her head. "I don't think so. I've never seen him do anything like that before. Nor would he be stupid enough to antagonize you." She paused and thought for a moment. "Mira's the one who can fling ice around. Which I have to admit now is a bit odd, given her affinity is to water, not ice. But as I said, Mira would never interfere with your divination tools. It has to be some outside source, related to the question or the card itself."

"Well, I'm sure I don't get it," Marie said. She sighed. "I suppose I have to go back out there. Someone mentioned wanting to get a fix on this things location."

Rey nodded. "I wish I could ask three more questions, about what happen with the card." She reached out and put her hand on her sister's arm. "Promise me you'll be extra careful until we find the Key and put a stop to what's going on right now."

"I'm sure I'm not the one who needs to be careful, but okay, I will if you will."

"I will," Rey replied, and gave Marie's arm a slight squeeze, and followed her back into the kitchen.

Mira watched them both warily. She was standing now, next to Less.

Marie ignored what happened before she left the room and got back to business. "You wanted to know a location for this thing, right? Tell me exactly what you want to know and what you want me to use to find it."

"We want to know where the *Eochair Dubh* is. Mira came into...contact...with it," suggested Less.

Marie frowned. "She messed with my reading once, who's to say she won't do it again?"

"I'm inclined to believe Mira that she didn't interfere with your cards," said Less. "The

Black Key, or whatever entity is trying to come through the Black Gates, is clearly actively resisting our efforts to find them. It makes it even more imperative that we continue to try anything we can."

Marie huffed a little but sat down. She pulled the covered orb to the middle of the table and removed the cloth, revealing a fist-sized crystal ball on a small stand of black felt-lined wood. Marie reached across the table and grasped Mira's wrist. "This will take about ten minutes." She closed her eyes.

After nearly ten minutes of quiet concentrate she opened them and murmured, "Show me the *Eochair Dubh*." Marie stared into the glass orb and so did everyone else, though only Marie could see and hear into the magical window she opened.

"It's somewhere dark and small. A purse or large pocket maybe. It's black and it's got ... like teeth. Blackened, crooked teeth form the key. It... I think it's aware somehow. It sees with ethereal eyes. It hears. Oh goddess! It can see me, too! It's coming," Marie said. She turned her head this way and that, as if trying to break off seeing it, but she couldn't look away. "It's coming, it's coming... IT'S COMING!" she screamed.

The crystal ball exploded with a sonic boom as shards of glass were sent in every direction with the power of a grenade. Marie and Mira were thrown back. Marie hit the kitchen wall as Mira flung across the living room into the front door. Rey and Less, having stood a little apart were both still slammed to the kitchen floor.

"Fuck!" moaned Less as he struggled to get up. He moved to wipe the blood from his eyes but pulled away quickly when he cut himself on protruding glass. "Fucking key...purse...thing." As he moved to check on the others, he gingerly pulled his cell phone out to call Tom to get him here as fast as possible.

"Marie!" Rey scrambled, half crawling, half walking, to her twin's side, trying to fight off the wooziness and ringing in her head.

After making his call, Less went to check on Mira. He wanted to help, but there was so much blood. His mind was foggy. He remembered something about not removing objects that protruded from wounds. They would cut again coming out. All he could do was reach out and touch her leg, where it was undamaged by the blast. "Mira?"

She sat up, obviously stunned and cut up, but not dying. She gave Less a nod, then looked around. Seeing Marie, she frowned and came to help Rey.

Doctor Tom said he could be there in fifteen minutes. It wasn't at all certain that Marie would last that long. While the others had serious cuts, the witch's injuries were the deepest. She was bleeding a lot and bleeding fast. She might die in only a few minutes at this rate.

"We've got to stop this bleeding," Rey said, trying to keep her voice from breaking.

Less grabbed the tablecloth and shook off the cards and crystal fragments. He began tearing it into bandages.

"Forget that," Rey said, pulling her car keys out of the pocket of her jeans. "There's a first aid kit in the trunk of my car. Get it. Hurry before she bleeds to death!" She pressed the button to open the trunk of her car then dropped her keys on the floor beside her.

As Less retrieved the keys, he gave Mira a task. "If the Key is on it's way on top of all this," he looked around at the wreckage of the room. "We're going to need help. Call Aurra. Call Richard." Then he dashed outside to get the kit.

Mira nodded and started making the calls. She had Aurra coming over with a few brief words and then she got Richard's number from Rey. She called him as well. "*They are both on their way,*" she reported.

Fifteen minutes later, Doctor Tom had arrived with his emergency kit. He get Marie moved to her bed where he got to work picking out the glass shards before he would use his magic.

Richard arrived only a few minutes after Tom did, wearing his armor and his enchanted battle-ax. He didn't ask questions. Instead, he saw the carnage and, since Mira had told him someone bearing a terrible artifact was on his way to do them harm, he took up a post outside the front door.

Aurra arrived last, about twenty five minutes after Mira's call. Everyone was tense. Aurra took one look at the blood and carnage everywhere and looked horrified. She retreated to Marie's room to offer what healing she could do to Tom.

Mira began cleaning things up, but there would be a lot of repainting to do. Her hands shook, she was so nervous.

Rey moved to stand next to Richard. "She scryed for us," she said softly, unable to keep the pain and self-recrimination out of her voice. "The Black Key sensed her, tracked it back and saw her. Caused the crystal ball to explode." She shook her head. "We can't stay here, but Marie shouldn't be moved and I can't leave her. Not now."

"The Key is after us, so if we leave it might leave Marie alone," said Less. "But it also might force her to hurt herself. I suggest we fortify here. Get wards in place, shields, armour, whatever."

Richard agreed and they began to discuss who else to call and what resources they could collect.

They were still trying to put together a defense plan when they heard tires screeching in agony and an engine rev to its red line. Since they were outside talking to Richard, they

got a front row view of the Black Key's arrival. A black sedan careened into view as it rounded a corner and entered the street. It lined up directly for Marie's double-wide and hurtled toward them despite the fact Richard's jeep was in the way.

The minotaur snarled, hefted his axe and strode forward as if a mere car held no trouble for him. The sedan crashed into his vehicle with enough force to spin it out of the way and send it tumbling. The sedan's front end twist in an explosion of glass and crumpled metal, forcing the front driver's-side wheel to turn sharply to the left. It dug into the turf and the car flipped right in front of Less and Rey.

Both changelings had to dive to the ground to avoid a dual beheading as the car crashed lengthwise into the house. Air bags had already exploded and car alarms from the jeep and the sedan were both screaming furiously.

Richard had been clipped by the hurtling vehicle and knocked out of the way, but he got up. Chain links from his armor had been torn over his shoulder, but he seemed none the worse for it. He dashed to the driver's side while Less and Rey recovered and reached for the driver's door.

It slammed open, knocking Richard back and a man tumbled out. Blood streamed from a gash over his right eye, and the skin around the base of his neck was blackened. Blue veins showed clearly against his skin. He carried a courier satchel over his shoulder and across his chest.

Before Richard could regain his balance, the man back handed him. The gesture seemed small but Richard was knocked ten feet to land on his back.

"Knock knock! Time for the witch to die," said the man with a bright smile.

"I don't think so," Rey said, and her thorns shifted and spread over her, creating what looked like chain mail armor covering her skin. "Get the bag away from the man," she said in Glymjack Cant as she interposed herself between the man and the door to the trailer. She likely didn't stand much of a chance at stopping him, but at least she could slow him down.

Mist and smoke swirled around Less. Parts of him seemed to disappear in the turbulence. He darted past the crazed, Key-controlled man, and gathered ogre's strength while he slashed at the man's chest with his sword. He was aiming to cut the strap of the courier's bag. Less struck with incredible strength but when his blade struck it felt like he was trying to cut down an iron post with a sword. The force of the blow vibrated painfully through his arm. Although the man seemed unharmed, Less did see the fibers of the strap fray where his blade struck.

The Bearer of the *Eochair Dubh* made an upward gesture with both hands and vines sprouted from the torn lawn. In moments they wound around Less and Rey's feet and up their legs where they thickened and fastened onto them with a painfully strong grip. He

stepped away from them, out of reach of claw and sword and took a quick survey of the damaged home to find an easy way inside.

But he'd discounted Richard. The hulking man rose up silently behind him and swung his axe in a mighty, two-handed swing that sliced down onto the Bearer. His enchanted *Glacial Axe* bit deep into its target, splitting him from shoulder down through his chest, surely splitting lungs and heart in two. The paladin of shadows had put everything he had into that blow.

The gloating look on the Bearer's face froze as Richard wrenched his axe free from his enemy. A wide V had been cut in him yet horrifyingly, black tendrils of blood reached across the massive, wedge-shaped wound as his body tried to repair itself.

Rey's heart lurched with pride at Richard's blow, and worry at seeing the Key's bearer trying to repair itself. She called upon her ability to avoid being restrained and tried to move out of the vines' grasp. She slipped free!

Less was stuck fast. How he wished he could just dissolve into a summer breeze. He called upon his Fae magic once again and tried to cloud the Key Bearer's eyes. "*Eochair Dubh!*" he yelled, a wild attempt to distract the monster. "I know your name!"

He looked toward Less's blurred form and then laughed. "That is not the name of my master. That is a title."

He turned on his heel and caught Richard's hand as he was bringing his axe down for another chop. The Paladin looked surprised.

"Minotaur. Open a door for me." He swiveled and threw Richard through the living room picture window, breaking out the supports and opening a large hole. He paused before following Richard inside. "Now, where did the weird looking bitch go?" he wondered, realizing Rey was no longer entangled in the roots he'd brought forth.

"Right here," she replied with a mocking curtsy from behind him, her eyes never leaving him. Her movement became more elegant and poised. Rey's plan was to draw his attention, hopefully enough for Richard to get another blow, or the rest of her motley to do *something* to stop the Key or get Marie to safety.

Less wished Richard had removed the Bearer's arms. At least then it would have been easier to snatch the bag away. He couldn't be of any assistance out on the lawn, so he reshaped his legs into that of a slender, runway-walking model and struggled out of his shoes.

While Less stepped free of the viny bonds, the Key Bearer pulled himself together and healed up. He shook his head and shivered. He back-handed Rey and while she was able to avoid the majority of it, the tips of his fingers raked her neck, drawing cherry-bright lines of blood before she hopped out of the way.

Richard was struggling out of the house, but he was no longer in any shape to fight. He crawled through the broken remains of the window, bleeding from a dozen deep cuts, and fell to the grass with a moan. He struggled to get to his feet.

A gun roared. The Bearer jerked and looked down in surprise as a bullet hole had blasted right through his body. The gun roared two more times and two more holes blasted through the Bearer.

With a roar Richard rose and slammed his axe into the Bearer again. This time it nearly took the Bearer's head off, cutting through the satchel strap, flesh, and bone.

The Bearer went to his knees and died, a surprised expression still frozen on his face. He fell face down.

The satchel had fallen, too, breaking open and spreading its contents across the lawn. Three old library books, a spiral-bound notebook, two pens, a pencil, an eraser and a set of house keys lay exposed.

Doctor Tom poked his head out the space where the picture window used to be. "Cold-wrought Iron bullets. Bypasses any fae defense or defensive magic," he said. "Unfortunately, iron bullets ruin guns." He looked sadly at his old service revolver, sighed, and chucked it aside; the barrel had split.

"I'll get you a new one," Rey said, looking at the keys on the ground. "I don't suppose anyone has got an iron box or something we can put this stuff in until we can figure out what to do with it?" She wanted to run over to Richard and aid him, but there was something she needed to do first. She rubbed her thumb over the gems on the ring Lyla had given her. Perhaps it would reveal something she and the others couldn't see. Everything seemed normal to her, other than the fact there was a car part way into Marie's living room, a man had been killed on the front lawn for the neighborhood to see, and that she could already hear sirens in the distance.

"Way to go, Tom!" said Less as he sashayed up on spidery legs to survey the scene. Rey was right. He was sure this wasn't the end of the Black Key. In all likelihood, all it needed was to find a new Bearer. "Let's get Aurra to ward it until we can find a suitable cage." He pulled out his phone to call his Wardens. "We're going to need to run some serious interference with the police. Someone's bound to have reported the car accident." As the phone dialed one of his contacts he looked around and asked, "Where's Mira? How is Marie doing?"

Tom filled him in. "Mira has lost consciousness, but I don't see any obvious trauma. Marie is still in critical condition. We've done the immediate healing we could. The rest is up to fate and a bit of luck, if she is to recover her sight."

Aurra looked out from the destroyed window. "Ward which? I can ward homes and I can

shield people."

Knowing the Key wasn't out in the open, Rey went to Richard to check on him.

Less had connected with Worm and quickly told her the situation. He hoped her connections in the city could help them with the police. He asked her to contact Saya, Bearer of the Tearful Cup, as well, in case she could help defray the possible mortal attention. He was already moving through the wreckage of the trailer as he terminated the call, looking for Mira. What had happened to her?

He found her curled up on the floor in the kitchen where she had begun to clean up the blood. She was passed out, with no life-threatening injuries, though she still bore the vicious cuts that both he and Rey also suffered from the exploding scrying crystal. "Mira? Mira!?" he cried urgently to her. Was this the Key's doing? He overturned the glass covered cushions of the couch and gently moved her to it. When she didn't respond he stroked her hair, steeling himself, then touched her temple and dove into the ocean of her subconscious.

There was blackness, nothing at first, and Less realized that Mira was not dreaming. She was unconscious; her mind shut down.

But then something happened. He saw a glimmer, like a distant star. As he watched it swept closer and grew large before him. When it stopped, he saw a female form, naked and crystalline. It was hard to make out details, but he knew it looked much like Mira. Perhaps this is what she might look like in ice form without the clouding details of frost that instantly made her seem somewhat opaque when she took this form.

"Hello Les Seleman," the figure said. Her voice carried a distant echo of breaking icicles. The voice carried none of Mira's inflection or tone. He knew it instantly to be her, yet also something else. "Mira is not here right now, and I have no dreams in which you might play."

How it taunted him for her to use that name. The name he was forced to assume when the Ice Queen took his real one. "Where is she? We defeated the *Eochair Dubh*. The Black Gates will not be opened."

"Is this true?" She stared at Less. "It cannot be in your possession. If it was, then it would already have used you to destroy me. Yet I sense it is near. Very near.

"Never mind. Our time is short; only the instant between moments and this meeting is over. You must teach Mira to control her feelings. She must not continue to fight it; it will only overwhelm her like a tidal wave. She must climb above it and ride it through!"

The image of the Ice Princess began to draw away, though she seemed to struggle against it. "Less! Listen to me! You don't understand about the Key! No mortal or changeling can control it! Only a True Fae may control it, but never touch it! You have to..."

And she was gone. An instant later, Less found himself in his own body looking down at Mira.

Less turned his face to the others and shook his head slightly. How it frustrated him to be given such short access to the one who claimed his heart. "No one touch the bag!" he said loudly as he stood to rush back outside. He announced to everyone, "Touching the bag will only allow it to control you. We have to find a way of isolating it so no one touches it."

"I don't think the Key's here, Less," Rey said and she half knelt, half fell to her knees next to Richard. A quick look at him showed her he wasn't hurt nearly as bad as she was. "I checked, and everything there is exactly what it seems to be." She was fighting a losing battle to keep the intense pain she felt out of her voice. "We need to get out of here. Now. Before the police arrive."

Richard nodded agreement and climbed into his jeep to see if it would start. It had been mangled and turned over completely, ending on its wheels. By some stroke of good luck, the it started right up, despite the damage done to its body.

"Looks like it's going to run," he said. He hopped back out and left it running. Sirens were growing louder. "Who's leaving and who is staying?"

Less heard a rustle behind him. It was Mira. She was already sitting up, blinking dizzily and trying to regain her bearings.

It made sense now why his dream-meeting with the Ice Princess was cut short; Mira was regaining consciousness.

Rey looked at Less. It made sense for her to be the one who stayed, given her ability to deal with people and her own contacts within the police force. "And should we get rid of the body?"

Less clenched his fists in frustration. "The Key is nearby, I just know it!" He considered the body. "We could toss it into the Hedge," he suggested, immediately worrying about the consequences if the Key was still in it. "We could say the driver just ran for it."

Mira stood up and wobbled before she caught her balance. "Body?"

Sirens grew much louder.

"Mira?" asked Less quickly, unwilling to touch anything in case it was the Key. "Can you see the Key anywhere around here with your Sight?"

"There's no time!" Rey said. "Take the body and go!"

Less, with a twitch of his head towards the body of the Bearer, silently asked Richard's help in carrying the dead man. Using a bit of his dwindling reserves of Glamour, Less turned the back door of the Jeep into a gate to the Hedge. They tossed the body through and Less slammed the door.

Mira had made it to the broken windows before she collapsed again, moaning. She struggled mightily but it seemed a losing battle. *"It's still here,"* she managed to say.

Doctor Tom got an arm around her and helped her to Rey's car; she was unconscious again before he got her there.

Aurra said she was staying with Marie, that she'd tell the police she was visiting Marie when the driver rammed the house. Glass from the window struck Marie in the face and she'd tell them that the driver, looking badly injured ran off but she didn't see where because she was worried over Marie's condition.

Aurra began dialing 9-1-1.

Rey grabbed the courier bag, quickly scooped up everything that had fallen out of it (using the bag so she didn't touch anything), and tossed it into the trunk of the car. She slammed it shut then hobbled to the front of the car and half fell into driver's seat. "Get in, Doctor Tom. We'll go to my place."

Less tried to see Mira from his place in Richard's Jeep as they pulled onto the road. He watched Aurra, framed by the damaged trailer, recede until they turned the corner. "It's still there," he said quietly. "What is it's hold over Mira? What are we missing?" The danger of the Key overwhelming them as it had the previous Bearer had wound him up tight.

Richard looked at Less. "If it involves Mira Naia, I can tell you it won't be straight-forward. If you are talking about that artifact thing, then who knows? Maybe it once belonged to her Keeper and so it has a connection with her she doesn't remember."

The minotaur turned his jeep west and south, heading to Rey's house for lack of a better plan. He decided that would be the most likely place Rey would go.

By the time they had reassembled at Rey's house, Mira had recovered again. Everyone was banged up and cut up pretty thoroughly, so Doctor Tom went to work getting people patched up as well as he could while they discussed what happened and what it meant.

Less touched gingerly at a snug bandage close to one of his eyes. "I'm sorry about what happened to Marie, Rey. I was pushing too hard for information. Now, the Bearer is dead but Black Key is still out there, somewhere, probably trying to find a new Bearer to take another crack at us."

"I know I'm supposed to be able to sense this thing, but I've been useless. I could feel it;

it's like it knows exactly what buttons to push with me. I try to resist and it overwhelms me every time," Mira put in. It felt hopeless to her. No matter how hard she fought it, it was just too much.

"Maybe you shouldn't resist," Rey said. "Go with it. Find a way to use it." She glanced around at the others. "It's one of the things I've been taught."

A whirlpool of emotions threatened to drown her. She found it very difficult to tell them what it was like. *"I'm really afraid if I let it happen, I'll lose control of my body. That's why I resist."*

The Ice Queen's words came back to Less. He felt them like being dunked in icy water. He gritted his teeth and tried to emulate emotions he didn't necessarily feel. "You give over control of your body when you are with Drake," he suggested gently. "If you resisted him it would be rape, but since you accept him it is beautiful. I don't much like the idea of the Key being in control of you, either, but it seems to be related to you in some way. Maybe through you we could find out what it wants."

Rey frowned slightly at what Less said about Mira and Drake, but set it aside for later. "You've had moments, seemingly during moments of extreme stress, where you've had black outs," she said gently. "Yet during those moments I've observed you, you've been lucid, if not a little cold. Perhaps what you need to do to beat this thing is let that subconscious part of you deal with this threat."

Mira looked frustrated. *"Look, this is different. If I give in to this thing, it's not like giving myself over to someone I trust. I don't trust the Key. I think it's going to try to use me against you, like it does everyone else. We've seen how powerful it makes mortals. What do you think will happen if it takes me and uses me against you? With the Key in control of me, what would it be capable of? Are there any limits?"* Mira shook her head. *"What you two are asking is insanely risky."*

"Then we don't do it," Rey replied immediately. "We need to find some way to protect you. And figure out why it's going after you specifically, and not any of the rest of us." She paused for a moment, thinking about the Bearer's bag and its content in the trunk of her car. "Do you sense it nearby?"

Mira shook her head. *"No. Nowhere close."*

"Mira," said Less, gently, hesitating. "Remember, this is a thing of the True Fae. You cannot fight it. No one can. But I also don't want it to control you. Emotions seem to be important to the Key. It takes the worst of our emotions and uses them. If you can control your emotions, take hold of your elemental self. Perhaps even drain away the Glamour we've harvested from emotions. Maybe, without any emotions to twist the Key could not control you."

"Well, I harvest glamour from hedge fruit, generally. That's emotion-neutral as it gets..."

"I agree with Less," said Richard. "It's a risk, yes. But if you want this all to stop you'll have to take the chance because what you've been doing isn't working. You may not have any more chances to get a handle on this before it manages to kill you or possess any one of us."

Mira looked to Rey for moral support.

Rey's words were for both men, but she directed them at Less. "Are you telling Mira she has to allow herself to be violated, perhaps in a worse way than Xavier and Leopold ever did to her, in order to find the Key?" Her voice was calm, but her thorns shifted slightly.

Richard intervened. "It doesn't have to be that way. Mira, if you make the decision to accept what's happening, do you think it will still hurt you?"

"I don't know, but it seems to like chaos and destruction and murder."

"True enough. But what if the Key itself isn't doing anything to you at all. What if it's something else?"

"Huh?"

"We haven't seen any evidence of the Key trying to take over anyone that hasn't touched it physically. What if this has nothing to do with the Key itself, but something about you that reacts to the Key's presence."

Mira stared at him. *"But... how could that be?"*

"I don't know but think about it. If the Key isn't attacking you, then you have only to be able to trust yourself, your own instincts."

"It makes sense," Rey replied. "The only person it seems to be able to affect from a distance is you. The only person it affects that way at all is you. It just used physical attacks against the rest of us. There's got to be something about you specifically that triggers it."

"I'll - We'll be here to help you," said Less.

"Okay then. Next time I feel the Key, I'll just... go with the flow." As unsettling as the idea was, Mira knew that resisting had been useless so far.

"If the Key isn't here, then it's still back at Marie's," Rey said. "What are we going to do about that?"

"I don't think you have much choice," said Richard. "You can't go back there now unless you want to spend quality time with the cops."

"By the time we can get back without interference from police, the Key will have found someone else to ride." Mira said.

Richard sighed. "Without you conscious and able to pinpoint it, the Key was nowhere to be seen."

"We already knew it had powers to command people. If it can do that, what's a bit of glamour to conceal itself with an illusion? That means it will be found only by those it allows. Or me."

Richard nodded. "All this proves the Black Key can sense when magic is used to track it and has access to powers allowing manipulation of people and its environment. This thing is intelligent."

"Frighteningly intelligent."

"And it will be back," said Less. "Whatever True Fae it is trying to come through the Gates is pretty serious about it."

"Or the Other whose Gate it is could be looking for it," Rey added. "We need to find out which Keeper it is. That might give us more information about how to deal with the Key."

Richard looked curious. "How will that help us? Keepers aren't exactly open books."

"If we know which Keeper it is," Rey replied, "or rather, which aspect of the Keeper is involved with the Gate, then we might be able to figure out a weakness the Key might have. If we're really lucky, we might be able to find a Changeling in the Duchy who was Taken by that Keeper, and who might remember something that might be helpful. We can't use magic to track the Key, not any more. So we need to find some other way to find it. I really don't want to wait around for it to come after us."

"Okay," Richard said. "Who do we know might have some kind of archive? Most changelings I know are afraid to track this kind of information for fear it would attract the attention of a Keeper. And everyone I know doesn't much like trying to remember what happened in the durance in Arcadia."

A little smile curved Rey's lips. "We are part of the Court of Fear, gatherers of the occult that others dread. I think I know where to start looking."

Less was glad of that. He was fresh out of ideas of what to do about the Key or the Gate. All he could really focus on was trying to get access to the Ice Queen - through Mira.

"I need to make some phone calls," Rey said. "Will our Queen be awake now, or should I call later?" she asked Richard.

"She will probably be in our hollow right now," he said.

Rey nodded. "Will you ask her if she will meet with me at her earliest convenience? And if you see Lydia, will you ask her the same? I need to speak with them about the Black Key," she said.

"Sure, I'll pass that along."

Rey smiled in gratitude, but what she really wanted was to be in the calm and comfort of his arms. Everyone she cared about was hurt, her sister, perhaps worst of all. She should have known better than to get Marie involved, and now she may have cost her her livelihood. Made her more vulnerable to her enemies, and the Key was still out there. Rey fought to keep her brambles and thorns from writhing with the anger she felt. Letting the others know would be just another failure on her part.

Though he would have preferred to stay, Richard had agreed to speak with the Queen and with Lydia regarding Keepers and meeting Rey at the earliest. He left to do exactly that.

Rey stepped out onto the side porch, wanting some privacy. She took out her cell phone and called Ishtar. Nobody answered this time, so she left a message, explaining what had happened at the trailer. She described Marie's injuries - and how she'd been injured - and the fact that while they had defeated the Bearer, the Key might still be after Marie.

The next day or two was spent mostly recovering from injuries. While Mira was able to recover rapidly on her own by returning to the motley hollow, Doctor Tom saw to it the others were in good shape as well by the second day.

Marie's condition had been stabilized and much improved by Tom, but she was left blind. Bitter and angry, she wasn't accepting any visitors other than Aurra and Yvonne at the hospital.

Mira had returned, in great shape, from the Hollow after just one day of enjoying four small pieces of goblin fruit. Although the metabolic dependency on Arcadian food had its drawbacks, it clearly also had advantages. Mira hovered over her friends, feeling guilty she had recovered so quickly. She retrieved food and cooked for them. Mira had insisted that Rey should stay with her while she recovered, arguing that the Key could still be hunting them and that it was unwise to split up and make the Key's job easier.

Less was feeling better later, thanks to Doctor Tom's handiwork and while it was still slower (since Tom had to replenish his own reserves while he worked with Rey, Less and Marie) Less's recovery was still three times faster than it might have been. It was then about a day's work replenishing his depleted Glamour reserves.

Rey was feeling better about the time Less was, well enough to meet with Queen Veridia. The meeting was short; in the time that had passed since Richard told her of the meeting and what Rey wanted, Veridia had made some inquiries and did some research. Unfortunately, there was no specific mention of a Keeper in relation to this Black Gate and Black Key. However, she did dig up some lore on these items using contacts outside the Duchy. While this research was ongoing, she had one intriguing tidbit which led her to a lot of speculation. Scary speculation.

There was a legend among changeling loyalists seeking to regain the favor of their Keepers and return to Arcadia of something called the Gates of Arcadia. This was a general term for the boundary between Arcadia and all the realms it contained and the Hedge. Veridia theorized that the Black Gate could simply be another name for the same concept. Obviously, it needn't be actual "gates" at all, but simply a way to Arcadia; a convenient term to use when talking about that legendary boundary.

If Veridia was right about the Black Gate being simply another name for a way in and out of Arcadia via the Hedge, then the unique thing about the current situation would be the Black Key. The way through the gate might be also how one selected which Arcadian realm one entered. Sort of like using the same door to enter multiple different dwellings. You do the right thing, or say the right word, or have the right item, and the "door" opens to the place you want to go.

What the Black Key might open to is anyone's guess. But if the "Black Gates" were open, Veridia theorized that could mean that one Keeper might have found a way to maintain a connection to Arcadia. Normally, Keepers can be away only so long -- they are creatures of such immense and powerful magic that only a tiny portion of them, an aspect, can come through at a time and even then, only for a limited time. However, with a connection to Arcadia maintained, they might be able to remain abroad for much longer periods of time. Perhaps indefinitely. This could have a dramatic affect on creatures from this realm who might also escape into the Hedge and our world, extending their ability to remain abroad, or it might alter reality itself if the gates are left open, essentially creating a sort of Arcadia or at least a Hedge realm here on earth.

In the city.

Vines growing from tomatoes and killing people, therefore, was the barest minimum of effects. Veridia told Rey that if she was correct, then the long the Black Key was abroad, the more things were going to change. The Hedge was going to bleed into this reality -- with devastating effect.

Whatever Keeper figured out how to make this Key, Veridia told her, it was the work of pure mad genius. Whoever possessed the Key would be able to either control the Gates and save Mythic City, or remold it into a new fey realm on earth the likes of which hadn't been seen in thousands of years. In such a future city, supernatural predators would be revealed for what they are. Changelings would lose the protection of the Mask.

Humanity's technology would cease functioning. Beasts of the Hedge would begin hunting the streets.

If this wasn't stopped, Veridia told her, then in a matter of months, or perhaps a year, this city will no longer resemble a human realm. It will be as surely taken as changelings themselves were.

Veridia would continue to pursue information and legends taken from captured Loyalists. She suspected there might be a secret Loyalist group that knew much more about the Key. If she could uncover this group and at least some of its members she would share that information with Rey, though Veridia felt it would do little good unless Rey found some way to deal with the Black Key. It would be no ordinary artifact but possibly the most dangerous artifact ever seen.

Rey then told Veridia about what had happened at Marie's trailer, about Mira's apparent link to the Black Key - and what little Less had told her about Mira being able to locate the Key. She described what happened to her motley mate whenever the Key was near, and the pledge Less had talked Mira into. Despite the Winter King's explanations, it still did not sit right with her.

Veridia listened without interrupting and then was quiet for a minute. "Taking the pledge does seem extreme. Mira is stubborn -- he must have her trust completely to put up with something like that. It also seems the King wanted very much to be near Mira. It's almost as if he expected something even before you know how she would react to the Key's presence. The Winter King is hiding something."

"I know, but I'm not sure how to figure it out." Rey frowned. "When I asked him what was up, he gave me this story about needing to stick together. When I brought up that if it was that important that we all stick together until the Key was found I should have been included in the pledge, he wouldn't give me an answer. And the restriction of the pledge, it was like he tried to bind her to him."

"Could it be the Winter King is trying to protect her from something? No." Veridia answered her own question. "That wouldn't make sense. He would have included you and Tom if security was the issue. He must want her for himself. For what and why is the question."

"We need to find out what it is." Rey shook her head, wondering what was going on in Less' head.

"I'm afraid all that 'we' contains is you. I'll keep working on the more important mystery of the Black Key. You figure out what's going on with your friend."

Although the pledge between Mira and Less was technically over since the Key had been 'found', Mira had no objection to Less staying at her apartment.

Mira called Drake soon after the Black Key's attack. Around him, she turned into a little sign-language chatterbox and it was surely irritating to Less that he couldn't understand ASL. She probably blabbed everything. She also wasn't shy showing her feelings toward him.

He started staying nights, which might have thrown a wrench into Less's plans except for the fact that Mira worked late and therefore needed to sleep in. Drake, however, had to leave early in the morning, leaving an ample window of opportunity for Less to investigate Mira's dreams, which he discovered seemed to be more frequent and intense in the morning hours.

Drake's constant presence galled Less. He was supposed to be out chasing dragons in the wilds of the Hedge, but instead comes striding back in with his perfect hair and shining sword to match his eyes. Less knew how he could make contact with the Ice Princess now, and he would be damned if he would let Drake rob him of that!

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Less spent every moment he could in Mira's dreams. With Rey handling the investigation into the Black Key and Spring running the Duchy, he could afford to take a nap in the afternoon when not on shift at the railway station. His shifts were just as important as he needed to feed on the desperation of mortals who had lost their property. He didn't dare steal into Mira's room after Drake had left in the morning. There were too many people coming and going, and she would be sure to wake up and catch him sometime. But he kept a photograph of her, nearly worn through from being folded so many times, close at hand.

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After a little thought he felt he had a good argument. He told her that he was concerned about the Key finding its way to her apartment. While it was warded and the protections strong, the Black Key's powers were so overwhelming it might still affect those who

dwelled there. However, the Ward also affected his ability to call upon contracts, severely limiting his ability to protect himself or anyone else while there. This wasn't exactly true, Less knew. By a simple experiment, he discovered that any power he used that didn't affect or influence those at Mira's apartment would not be inhibited by the Ward. But Mira couldn't know that because she wasn't affected by the Ward.

Mira was surprisingly hesitant to make an exception to the Ward. But, she trusted him completely and he found he could rely on that trust to make things go his way. Mira made the exception to the Ward and Less now had not only a way to influence her dreams from a safe distance, but her apartment had just become a safe retreat for himself as well. Even better, Mira mentioned he was the only exception she had made to the Ward. That meant even Drake was not excepted.

Less didn't dare steal into Mira's room after Drake had left in the morning. There were too many people coming and going, and she would be sure to wake up and catch him sometime. But he kept a photograph of her, nearly worn through from being folded so many times, close at hand.

She sometimes dreamed of the time before being Taken. In Detroit, on the street, hooked on heroin. They were confusing and lonely dreams that he did his best to make better. He could make Remy show up and take her away from it all. If he hadn't known before, it was clear she just didn't have the capacity to say no to things that made her feel good. A bit of the wild thing still in her from the old days. Less decided it would do well to include Remy, and the temptation of the raw lustful things she wanted him to do to her, as often as possible. Dreams of Drake were easily overwritten to star the vampire, which usually spiced the dreamscape up considerably. Maybe one day he would dare to insert himself into her dreams, but for the time being it suited his purposes for her to be thinking of her dream-orgasms with Remy when Drake wasn't around.

What he really wanted to do, however, was plant the seed of doubt in Mira's mind about Drake's suitability. He spent considerable time thinking about the dreams that he would craft that would leave a bad taste of Drake in her mouth in the morning. He started with her dreaming of Drake's adventure hunting briar wolves in the fae forests at the borders of the Duchy. He made sure to cast Teara as the perfect woman: bold, sensual, elegant, and most importantly, sophisticated. They spent days alone together, walking through sun-dappled forests, reminiscing on old times. Rekindling an old flame (quite literally, in the case of the elemental warrior.) And so, after fighting side-by-side, still covered in blood and ash, they made passionate love on the forest floor beneath a full moon.

In other dreams with Drake, Less cast him as callous. After he spouted the love poetry that seemed always on his lips when they were together, he would laugh about her simple-minded gullibility to his Summer comrades-in-arms. He paraded her publicly when they out on a date, or at the Blood Tears club, to show her off as if she were an expensive car or a rare butterfly. He would tell her everything she wanted to hear to her face, but would dismiss her behind her back. The crowning scene was them making beautiful love in her bed. There were candles, soft music, rose petals, silk sheets. He told her that he wanted

to explore her and be explored. He said that it wasn't about him or her. It was about them. He told her that she deserved to be cherished, and not just the object of a wild rut. That it should be about taking joy in each other beyond just physical gratification.

It was exactly, to the word, what he had said to fiery Teara on the golden leaves of the Dark Wood. It was exactly what he had said to her the last time they had sex. It was what he always said to Nym, Rena, and any other woman he managed to bed. And when they finally came together at the end, he rolled over and made a mark on the headboard. It was a mark next to "water". After a moment's hesitation he also made a mark next to "ice" and silently congratulated himself. There were marks next to "fire" and "wood" and "earth" and "metal" also. Some had more than one. "Air" was conspicuously without a mark.

Less had invited Mira to lunch with him at the train station cafeteria. While he waited for her, he realized that this was the very table that he had been meeting with Rover when she - Mizuko, then - had rushed headlong into their lives. A lot had happened since then.

Today, of course she didn't make her way to the station stumbling over train tracks while running from hired thugs. She'd taken a cab and walked in. It was unseasonably warm today but she took a page from Amber's taste in dressing. She wore a black miniskirt, long stockings with platform shoes that added enough inches to her height she didn't seem short, and a black halter top under a little leather jacket that left her belly exposed. She'd chosen to emphasize her Autumn court membership today by completing the outfit with spiked accessories -- a dog collar and leather gloves. Shadows seemed to cling to her, thanks to her choice in outfit as well as a touch of Autumn Mantle. She approached and sat down heavily.

Up close he realized that her face betrayed more shadows than were usually visible. Deep, dark circles underscored glassy eyes. Her usually perfectly brushed hair hung in tangles. Before she folded her hands he noticed they shook. All these things, Less knew immediately, were signs she hadn't been sleeping well. The powerful dreams he'd sent her were taking a toll as she sat up late, dreading what dreams lurked in the darkest hours.

"Hello Less."

"Hi Mira. You look tired. Can I order you some coffee?"

"I hate coffee," she said grumpily in Glymjack Sign. But she sighed, "Yes please. Black."

After he ordered, she asked, "So, what's up?"

Less hesitated. He knew Mira's state was his fault and second thoughts flooded over him. But memories of Mira sheathed in ice and the ugly truth that he had come too far to turn back now firmed his resolve. "Mira, something has been bothering me for a while now. It's just that with the Key, and Marie's blindness, and everything, I just haven't found the right time. Um...I'll just say it. The other day when we went to the Blood Tears club, you know, the three of us. Well, Drake propositioned me," he blurted.

She blinked at him. "Yes I know," she signed. "He invited you to join us as a threesome. I was the girl in his lap, remember?"

Less flinched and was clearly baffled that Mira knew about Drake's proposal. "You knew!? Drake didn't bring it up until you had gone to the bathroom with Rey. Did he discuss...it...with you? Because it did not seem so at the time."

Mira hesitated. "You talked about it when we were in the bathroom? Well, he hinted at it before I went in. I thought you didn't think he was serious, but I thought he was." She smiled, then continued to sign. "It might have been interesting if you had joined us."

Her smile faded thought and she looked away. When the coffee came she stared into it then signed, "Did he... talk about me?"

"Uh, no, not really. He was oddly insistent. I was taken aback, I wasn't expecting... Anyway, he was surprised that an elemental would refuse him."

She looked at him curiously, then moved her hands again. "What do you mean? Did he say something about elementals?" Her tired eyes sharpened as she awaited his answer. Her posture was tense.

"I don't know. Maybe I was reading too much into it. It seemed to me that he figured I was incapable of passing up an offer of hedonism on account of being an elemental. But I was a bit on edge - the surroundings were quite unfamiliar to me."

She stared at him, then snorted. "I thought it was Spring that was full of hedonists." She didn't look very happy and grumpiness was setting back in. The term didn't seem to bother her as much as the idea elementals in general being labeled, but she wasn't sure who was applying the label and didn't want to know.

Less decided it was now or never. "Mira, it's probably none of my business but I'm going to give you my opinion. I think you should break up with Drake. He's not good enough for you." *And you are!?*

A rush of memories of her terrible dreams this past week assaulted her. She remembered things he said to other lovers in her dreams, things she thought was meant only for her. She remembered how he'd belittled their time together.

They were only dreams, but as an oracle, she'd had lots of dreams that had truth to them. These felt real. They felt like the truth. She could see Less was right. Even if all the dreams were imagined paranoia, how could she ignore the fact that some part of her must really be concerned, some part of her thought this was all wrong?

She felt like her chest was constricted. She could barely breathe. She wouldn't allow herself to cry.

She'd built Drake up in her mind as her own hero, the one that accepted her weird quirks, her friendship with vampires and who had loved her anyway. But what if it was a lie? What if he just thought she was a good fuck, someone who satisfied his itch and nothing more? Then she'd made the same mistake as she'd made with Remy, expecting something that wasn't there and never would be.

It felt like the world was closing in on her, crushing her. She covered her face for a long moment. It felt like something snapped, something broke deep in her heart.

To hell with love, she thought. Something cold felt like it began to seep from the core of her being. What did she care? *"Everyone else takes what they want from me,"* she said aloud. *"So fuck them all. I'll do the same. I'll take what I want and do what I want. Why shouldn't I? You're right Less."* Her voice was raised; people around them were stopping what they were doing and staring at them. Mira didn't seem to care. *"He probably talks about me to those other bitches, like Tera. He probably laughs about how he got me to believe those sweet little lies he told me."*

"Well fuck him and everyone else can go to hell, too!" she shouted. *"Even Rey doesn't want me around! Veridia never cared. Everyone just uses everyone else!"*

It was suddenly very quiet all around them.

Less stared at her with huge, wide eyes for a moment. *He had created a monster!* He recovered and, though he was embarrassed by everyone's eyes on him, he reached out to her. "Mira, I know you're hurting right now but you may be over-reacting just a bit. Of course Rey wants you around! At a time like this you should surround yourself with your friends. We love you." *I love you.*

Mira looked around, realizing people were looking, then looked even more irritated. After people started to turn away, she used sign again. "Why? Because use hedonist elemental girls are too dense to know when they are being used? That's what you think Drake is doing, isn't it."

"To a degree, yes," said Less. "But I don't think he is malicious. I just think he's shallow and you can do better. Why don't we go back to my place, or to the Hollow. I'll get ice cream..."

Mira nodded ascent, and let him know his place was fine since it was close. She looked glum and her exhaustion was wearing on her even more. A few people still cast curious looks at them as they left. Mira ignored them.

Less settled Mira on the couch. She looked completely worn out. "Look, why don't you try to get some rest. You'll feel much better. I'll go to the store while you're asleep and we'll have a nice supper later."

She seemed grateful for the opportunity. "Okay. I'll try," she signed. "Thank you, Less."

"I'll be back soon," he said gently after he had covered her with some blankets. He knew she would probably sleep better that she had in a week without him prodding around in her dreams. He wished he had time to arrange for some nice, healing dreams but he had to get in touch with Aurra, the witch.

With some space between himself and her ears, he was able to put in a call to the witch. As it happened she was at her home. Sensing he had sensitive matters to discuss, she gave him directions and warned him not to vary from those. Her place was magically warded and if he did not follow the turns exactly, he might not be able to find it.

Giving the directions to a cab driver to follow specifically brought an irritable look from the cabby, but he nonetheless was able to find her home in the northern outskirts of Mythic City. Hers was a gated residence hidden behind vine-covered walls, but the cab was allowed through when he announced himself.

An attractive maid met him at the door when he rang the bell and invited him inside. She left him in the grand entry, promising him Aurra would be with him in a moment. She proved good to her word as Aurra gracefully descended stairs.

Looking around, Less could see the home was likely worth millions. Aurra Wyborne was a very, very rich woman. The Blood Tears Club suddenly seemed a quaint little hobby for the witch as he vaguely recalled she in fact owned several clubs and businesses.

"Mr. Seleman," she said coming toward him. She stopped a pace away. "So nice to see you."

"The pleasure is mine," he said with a deep nod of his head. He cradled his hat in front of his chest as he looked about. "You have a beautiful house." With the pleasantries out of the way he stated his business. "I've come for some magical help."

"I see." She smiled and gestured for him to follow her. She led him to a quiet, sunny sitting room where they could both sit in comfortable, stuffed chairs. "Some would say that magic never really solves problems, but I say it opens possibilities. Please tell me what opportunities you would like to see open to you."

"I would like to see two young changelings fall in love," he said simply.

Aurra took that in. "I can help with that. Is one of these two changelings, you?"

"No." He was already in love. He almost said it out loud but revealing secrets was so foreign to him that the words caught in his throat.

"One of them must come to me, then I can help them inspire some passion in their relationship, if needed." She paused and gave Less a measured glance. "But seeing two

other changelings fall in love isn't what you really want is it?"

All his eyes flicked to her. "No, I want one of these changelings to go away. Is there no way to turn his attentions elsewhere without him coming here?"

"There is. If perhaps there was a woman who wanted to catch his eye, I could do something for that woman to help ensure she could do so. But I'm no voodoo woman to put curses and blessings on people from afar. My magic is more immediate. She would need to come see me and I could give her an elixir, perhaps, that would make her more appealing. Or inspire lust in her man when he next saw her. Or spark a more lasting emotion."

Less frowned in frustration. He was confident the Ice Princess within Mira would recognize him if only she were not distracted by Drake. It had been necessary to manipulate her dreams to force them apart but now he was tired of such deceit. He wanted a clear field to allow her to come to feel for him what he felt for her - on her own, without interference. It seemed he would have to try to send dreams to Teara now, to try to convince her to once again pursue Drake. He rubbed his forehead. "I will try to convince the young woman to seek your services," he said dully. "Unless you know of a voodoo woman here in Mythic," he asked hopefully.

She nodded slowly. "I do, but that is dark magic Mr. Seleman. Black magic. Are you certain you wouldn't like to try an elixir?"

"It was a joke. Of course I would prefer an elixir but you said it would only work for the woman interested in luring the man away." It did bring up a rising concern for Less. Mira's dreams clearly (and graphically) showed that she expected quite...a lot...from her lovers. He was not confident he could reach the bar set by his rivals. He had heard whispered of a fae token, *le violon de Cyrano*, that could play a woman like a sweet love ballad. "Unless you have an elixir that could help me, uh, perform...?"

She smiled. "Yes, I think I do. Usually all it takes is a little something to bring a person the courage to be a little daring. I would be happy to give you a little something to try for free.

"As to the elixir, what I said is true. If I gave you an elixir to use, you'd have to give it to the woman and convince her to use it for her man, because if you used it, then the target of your affection would instead be the one to be drawn to you, turned on by you, find all your best traits irresistible. And that is not what you told me you wanted."

"But you could give the elixir to me, and I could give it to her?" The mere presence of such an elixir could be useful to him if it were found in someone's possessions.

"If you wish," Aurra confirmed. She paused, then took a guess at what Less was after. "Is all this about the pretty young woman for which I put up some wards at her apartment?"

The witch studied his face, but didn't need to use mind reading to know she was right. "I

could arrange it so you have a chance with her. Even if she was already seeing someone else. We could then simply leave it up to your natural charms, or you could use one of my elixirs to enhance your odds a little or a lot, depending on what you buy."

Less took a deep breath and hung his head. He had come so far, why should he leave all his hard work to chance? Finally, he nodded. "OK, rack me up. Arrange it, give me an elixir for a woman to distract my competitor, and a second one to boost my performance."

She dipped her head to him and rose from the chair. She left the room for a minute and when she returned, she had a wooden box and two vials. She handed him the first vial. It was crystal and contained a red liquid. "Use this by placing a drop on the tongue. Then, the object of desire will find you quite irresistible. This is yours in exchange for a small favor that will put you at no risk and take but a few minutes of your time should I call upon you. If you would rather not trade in favors, I can negotiate this price with you."

She handed him the next crystal vial. Inside were eight very small pills. "These are to be taken with a glass of water. Just two should be sufficient to help you boost performance. I would avoid taking them all at once, were I you, but it is not harmful or addictive."

Then she opened the wooden box. Inside were three crystal roses. She very carefully removed one and gave it to Less. "These are favors given to me from Mira herself. To protect her, I had to sacrifice part of my own soul -- damage I'm not yet recovered from. In exchange she gave me three wishes of a most serious nature. With any one of these you may wish for anything that Mira can provide, short of anything that would put her life at risk. I will give you one of these. In exchange you will owe me a similar favor as to what I'm giving you. This, however, is not negotiable."

"I agree to your price," said Less. At this point he was beyond negotiation. "Will she know what I have wished for? That it was I that wished?"

Aurra considered, then shook her head. "I don't know. That's not something I ever thought to ask. I just know she said to break a rose while asking for the favor I wanted and she would fulfill it to the best of her ability."

Less reached carefully into the box and selected a crystal rose. He held it up between them. There was no point in hiding his secrets from Aurra now. "I wish that Mira, without knowing she is being compelled by this wish, fall out of love with Drake and refuse any further advances by him, including arguments or proofs he may present to the contrary." He flung it sharply at the base of the wall.

The rose shattered and to his changeling eyes, released a flash of light. He sensed the Wyrd reach out past him, and then it was gone. It was done and there was not a single shard of glass that remained. Aurra closed the box.

Less let out a long sigh. The Ice Princess - Mira - had a hold over him like no other. He had to resort to holding power over her in order to bring her to him. Though this victory

tasted like ashes in his mouth, he was already swelling with excitement at the thought of his new proximity to her. The barrier of Drake was smashed, the path was clear. He held out both hands to Aurra. "My debt to you." In his open palms was his payment. Square pieces of plate glass, one larger than the other. On the surfaces, at certain angles, could be seen smoky images of snowflakes.

She smiled and took the glass pieces, careful not to cut herself on the sharp edges. "May fortune favor you," she said.

Meanwhile, Remy's plans continued to move forward with Amber. A week after the motley's fateful encounter with the Black Key, he was certain the girl was quite taken with him and ready to go to the next step. Being only mortal, he knew that she had no defense against his charm. Even if she was afraid or hesitant, he knew he could encourage her to take the step he required of her.

Now all he had to do was to get the magic Rey promised and set the mood for the perfect evening, one that would surely mark the beginning of his legacy.

Rey was already at Corazon when Remy arrived. She'd gotten there several hours early, taking the opportunity to visit with Alexei, something she always enjoyed. They had dinner in their office and chatted until shortly before Rey knew Remy was to arrive.

Remy had come to the club early as well, wanting to see Rey walk in, and he did, but he hadn't anticipated it being from the back rooms. He filed that information away for consideration later, picked up the heavy metal briefcase sitting next to his feet and met her at the bar.

They exchanged their usual greetings and moved to sit at a table near the wall.

"Is that my payment?" Rey asked, not looking at the case.

Remy nodded. "Are you sure you don't want the truth?"

Rey smiled. "You know as well as I do the value of truth."

Remy inclined his head slightly. "Touche, Miss Lafitte." He placed the case next to her chair.

"Very good." Rey reached out and touched the back of Remy's hand for a moment. She took a deep breath, then let it out slowly, as if she were trying to control some pain she was feeling. "With this gift, you can sire a child on the next female you have sex with. But don't dawdle, as the magic lasts only for the next night and a day. Once that time has passed, you are out of luck, and you will not get another chance."

Remy arrived at Amber and Mira's apartment less than an hour later. It was to be the big night. He'd been seeing Amber every night he had free over the past several weeks and he was sure the girl was quite taken with him.

Two nights ago he'd taken her out to some place he told her was very special to him. In fact he'd never been to the top of the Mythic Towers before, but it seemed like going to a place they could look down on the world was just the thing Amber would love. He wasn't mistaken.

He'd shared with her that he had lived so long a hopeless endless existence in which he saw one after another of his human family die. Friends, loved ones, all were stolen by time and age and accident until there was nothing left. The fates had not been kind to his family. Now he alone stood as a testament to the history of his lineage.

But he was undead, he'd told her. He could never truly experience life as he once had, for who would choose a man that could be there only half the time to be a father? And in any case, none but someone truly special could possibly bear him a child. One fated with a very special destiny, should she choose to take it and make it her own.

Amber saw his sorrow and looked at him with heartbroken eyes. Remy had swooped in for the coup de grace.

He told her how such a woman to bear a child from a vampire father would have to be so rare and so special, she would be like a legend among his kind. Admired. Protected. Cherished.

When she asked if he'd ever met someone so special.

He said he had, but only once.

When she had realized he spoke of her, she was putty in his hands. And so he told her that when they did this, it would be done right. Nothing could interfere. They would lie together and become one on a very special night.

That night was tonight. Amber opened the door the moment he knocked. She was dressed in exactly the dress and jewelry he had selected for her to wear. She'd ask Mira to give her the apartment for the night and to Amber's surprise, Mira hadn't argued. She'd just hugged Amber, kissed her on the cheek, and told her she would be back in the morning; sooner if Amber called for her. It was as if Mira knew this was to be Amber's night. Well. Mira always did tell Amber she could see the future. She must have seen this coming.

Remy greeted Amber with a kiss, gentle and full of romantic promise. When he finally

pulled back, he offered her his arm, and he escorted her downstairs. Waiting for them at the front door of the apartment was an elegant carriage pulled by two pure white horses.

Amber's eyes practically bugged out of her skull when she saw it. She couldn't believe it was for her. Once they were inside the carriage she hopped in his lap and kissed him with all the nervous passion of a girl anxious to become a woman.

Remy returned the kiss, then carefully moved her to the seat next to him. "Slowly, my love," he said. "You mean so much to me. Tonight must, and will, be perfect."

The carriage took them slowly through Santa Fe, eventually taking them to *L'étoile d'Or*, a four star restaurant Amber always saw mentioned on the society pages. Remy got down out of the carriage and offered her his hand to help her down.

Dinner at the restaurant was perfect, of course. Remy made certain Amber was able to sample whatever she liked, but not overindulge in any one thing. Expensive wine visited her cup -- better to help her with what was to come later that night, but he watched her carefully and made sure she had only enough to loosen up, not lose control.

The carriage was waiting for them when they were finished, and took them to the Santa Fe Regency Hotel. "We have all night," Remy whispered to Amber as he helped her out of the carriage once more, his hands lingering on her waist longer than necessary. She clung to his arm as he escorted inside.

Everything had already been arranged; Remy didn't need to stop at the desk and simply requested the concierge have a bottle of wine along with chocolate covered strawberries, frozen, sent up to his room. By the time he got off the elevator on the top floor, he was carrying her in his arms as if she was a new wife.

He set her down inside the room and nudged the door closed with his foot, then set her down so she could explore the place. He looked at her with satisfaction as she investigated the kitchen, the huge TV, the hot tub. Her eyes sparkled as prettily as her borrowed diamonds and he had to admit he'd chosen well. Amber turned heads. One tended not to notice when Mira was around, but the girl was a gem all of her own. He'd chosen the mother of his child well.

She stopped and drew back the curtains of the huge picture windows, then found the sliding glass doors. He followed her as she stepped out onto the balcony and gazed out across Santa Fe toward Mythic in the north. He put her arms around her and she cuddled up against his chest for a moment before she turned in his arms to face him.

She gazed up at him with worshipful green eyes. It never hurt to nudge his concubines over the abyss of lust and desire, so he turned on his usual charm, a casual use of the least of his powers. She practically melted. "I love you so much, Remy. I would do anything for you."

He smiled at her.

Then movement caught his eye. He looked over the top over his head, out into the night sky. A dark form blotted out the stars in a section of the sky. Remy frowned and squinted at it. An aircraft of some kind?

It swept closer, deathly silent. He began to detect movement at the extremities of the object. Wings? He began to draw back, taking Amber with him. He couldn't tell if the thing he saw was close or miles away; there was no way to tell.

"What's wrong?" Amber said. Curious as a cat, she twisted in his arms to have a look.

At that moment the creature entered the halo of light surrounding the grand hotel and he saw the beast for what it was. Amber screamed.

"There you are!" A voice boomed. "I could smell you miles away. Virgin." He said the last like the word made him drool.

Massive, clawed paws as big as Remy grasped the balcony's edge, shattering the railing. Amber screamed again. Remy backed into the sliding glass door -- damn it all! He'd closed it behind them so it would get cold inside for Amber. The glass was practically shatter proof and didn't give.

A massive, head swooped down to eye Remy and snarl at him. Red scales glittered under the balcony lights. Huge leathery wings beat the air, keeping the rest of him aloft.

"Mine!" The beast roared and snatched Amber out of his arms with such force Remy was sent through the glass. He feared the sudden impact might have broken Amber's neck, but he heard her screaming so it must not have been.

Rage burned through his dead veins and he sprung to his feet. He charged to the door and was met with a wall of fire the beast breathed at him. The pain of it ripped screams from his dried, burned lungs and he was flung further inside. Red panic raged through his mind and it took every ounce of will not to be devoured by the red rage and flee in a mindless frenzy of destruction. He knew that if the creature commanded fire, he had no chance. None at all.

He raced back to the balcony, intent on taking his prize back from the beast if he had to do it with his bare hands, though he knew he could not succeed. Not against fire.

But the beast and the girl were already gone. He could hear Amber's rapidly diminishing screams as the beast flew away.

He stared, still smoldering in his ruined evening clothes. Broken remains of the diamond necklace that he'd once lent Mira and had let Amber wear this night dangled in his hand. His burnt, nearly blackened fist was so badly damaged he could not open his hand. He

raised the necklace to the night sky and screamed with rage.

Remy watched as Minerva closed the secret door connecting the two apartments. His coterie did what they could to help him, but they were unable to help him retrieve Amber from the dragon's clutches. He did, however, have another option. Mira and her coterie - no, motley is what they called their group - had far more experience dealing with creatures from myths and fairy tales. Mira owed him a boon, and before tonight, he'd never had a reason to cash it in.

With a thought, he sent the summons to Mira, then sat back and waited, cradling his linen wrapped burnt hand in his lap. She arrived less than five minutes later. She looked tired, her eyes a little glassy but the more overriding emotion on her face was worry. She hadn't tried to resist his summons, but simply responded when she sensed he wanted her.

Some supernatural beings might have responded angrily to being summoned. Pride was a common weakness among those with power. It seemed absent with her -- or perhaps she simply knew he wouldn't have interrupted her evening in this way if it wasn't a real and dire need.

She'd barely waited after knocking to enter. When she spotted him standing near the raised bar at the kitchen, she signed, "What's wrong? Are you okay?"

Remy met her halfway across the room and brushed his lips against her cheek in a quick kiss. "My condition is unimportant. It's Amber. She's been taken by something that looked a lot like a dragon."

Her face paled. "A dragon." She was silent a moment as she thought about that. "I'll going to need to call in my allies for this one." She began sending a text message to both Rey and Less. "Do you have any idea what it wants with Amber?"

"It said it could smell her miles away, and called her a virgin. It grabbed her from the balcony and flew off," Remy said, his posture stiff and unmoving. "I did everything I could to save her, but it can breathe fire."

"Last I knew, she really was a virgin," Mira confirmed. She stopped signing long enough to finish texting, then resent the same text three times so her motley mates knew this was an emergency. She wrote, "The Dragon's brother has made himself known. Meet me at 255 C Street, Santa Fe ASAP."

Then she continued signing with agitation as she paced in front of the bar. "We might know where to start looking for this creature, but we'll need have as accurate a description of it as possible."

After Remy told her what he'd seen, she stopped pacing and signed, "It was to be tonight, wasn't it? This was going to be the beginning. Amber would carry your legacy."

Remy nodded.

She reached out and took his hand. "I'm so sorry Remy. You know I would do anything for my friends. This monster took my Amber; she's as important to me as she is to you. I'm not doing this as a favor to you; we'll find her because she's important to me, too. Keep your favor. Perhaps, if we can't find her in time, you'll have to use it for something else."

"She needs to be found by a couple hours before sunrise the day after tomorrow," Remy said, "or it will be too late for me."

She looked down at his hand, really noticing for the first time his burns. She didn't like what she saw. At least, Remy thought, her hands always felt cool which was soothing to the burns. "A fire-breather," she remarked. "Fire holds no danger to me. Will you stay here while Rey, Less, and I take care of this." It was worded as a polite question, but her tone made it more of a statement or command.

"Yes," Remy replied. "If I have to leave, I will let you know."

Mira looked up into his face. "You're still injured. You usually heal quickly, so you must need blood." She touched his cheek. "Take some from me. We are not in the throes of passion. I think it will be safe enough."

He shook his head. "Damage caused by fire takes time to heal, and Carson has brought me a supply already. You need all your strength to deal with the dragon." He stroked her cheek with the back of the fingers of his good hand. "I appreciate your offer."

She smiled and took a moment to relish the attention.

Then she asked, "Were you in Santa Fe when Amber was taken?"

"Yes, we were."

"And did the dragon fly north after that?"

Remy nodded. "In the general direction of Iron Mountain."

"That mountain and those around it are riddled with huge silver mines, long since closed. They might make for a lair big enough for a dragon to nest in. We had a hunch a second dragon may have taken up residence there due to hints that the first dragon left before we imprisoned it, but we have been working on a much bigger problem. Now I wish we'd gone there first." She let out a breath. "Don't worry. If that dragon is in there, we'll find it -- before the time is up."

She couldn't promise they could outwit or defeat the beast, but she didn't think that defeatist remarks were worth saying. They'd gotten very lucky the last time with the earth dragon to discover its weakness was in dealing with people. But a dragon that specifically

sniffs out virgins has dealt with people a lot more than his reclusive kin. They would need to try to find some other weakness to exploit in this fire dragon -- and she couldn't be sure there was some universal law that says every big nasty beast they come across had to have a weakness they could exploit.

Remy's searched Mira's face, noting her haggard appearance. "Are you alright?" he asked softly.

She nodded and signed, "Just tired." Her dreams, as well as her meeting with Less the day before had left her with sleepless nights and heartbreak over her doubts about Drake, but she couldn't see that her personal problem was anywhere near as important as Amber's safety. "It's nothing."

Remy smoothed her hair and pressed a kiss to her forehead. "When this is over, you need to get some rest."

A thin smile appeared on her lips for a moment. Sleep wasn't something she relished this past week. She gave him a hug, though, to show she appreciated his concern.

He returned the embrace, then asked "Do you want me here when your allies arrive, or should I be elsewhere?"

"That depends. Would you prefer me to leave off mention of your evening with Amber? If you do, then perhaps you should go. If you don't mind they know she was last with you and not me, then you might stay in case they have questions I haven't already asked."

He glanced down at his burnt hand and shook his head. "I don't want them to know. Not yet at least. I don't think there's anything else I could tell you and your friends about what happened that I haven't already shared with you. Tell them Amber was with a friend of hers when she was taken. I'll be next door if you need me. Call or text me if you have to."

She nodded and watched him go. She then sat down on the couch to wait for her friends and think.

Rey pulled into a street-side parking spot and double checked the address Mira had texted her. She'd come straight from work, having been in a meeting that had gone on far longer than it should have. She hadn't stopped to change, so still wearing her business suit, she walked up to the door and knocked.

Mira answered the door and brought her friend inside. It was a small, one room apartment, furnished to create two separate areas. By the door were chairs, a sofa and coffee table, and by the tiny kitchenette were a table with four chairs. There was also a fireplace, but it obviously hadn't been used for quite some time.

Rey looked around, quickly evaluating the place before walking over to the sofa and

setting her briefcase on the small table.

Less arrived by umbrella shortly after and, after double-checking the address, rang to be let up.

Mira let him in and finally, the majority of the motley was present. Mira explained quickly, in Glymjack sign. "Amber has been taken by a huge, red dragon last seen flying north in the general direction of Iron Mountain or maybe the nearby range around it."

"How long ago did this happen?" Rey asked.

"Less than an hour," Mira said. She looked back at Less and Rey through tired eyes a little bloodshot. Still, Less thought she looked better than she did yesterday. The nap she took at his place must have helped.

Less was stunned by the news. A *dragon* had slipped through his information network!? That wouldn't play well during his next fund-raising campaign. "Why would the dragon fly all the way over here for Amber? How is she connected?" he asked, mostly to himself. He didn't think anyone could know the answer.

"Are you okay?" Rey asked Mira, concerned at her friend's apparent condition.

"I'm fine," Mira signed. "The only thing I can think of is that Amber is a virgin touched by fae powers -- ensorcelled by me -- and probably looking to give that virginity up. My best guess is that this combined to make her a very tempting and rare catch for a dragon who has a taste for virgins. Guys, this is the dragon we have been waiting for, the one that the Earth dragon mentioned. We have to find him!"

"Who was Amber with? Do you know?" The person might be able to tell them more, Rey thought. Give them some clues.

Mira shook her head. "I never said she was with anybody at the time she was taken. I have all the information there is to be had. Let's go get her!"

"We need to figure out where to look first," Rey said. "There's a lot of area in the direction the dragon flew. But I have an idea for how we might be able to figure out where it was going. Something flying through the air is going to be picked up on radar, unless somehow the dragon's invisible to it. If we can find out if it did appear on radar, we might be able to narrow down where it went."

"Considering there hasn't been a single eye-witness report on the news, I'm betting it is Masked from mortal eyes. It probably doesn't show up on radar, but if you know someone with radar then it's worth a try," offered Less.

"It could show up as a plane or helicopter," Rey added, "which is why there was no great hue and cry in the press. Where was Amber when she was kidnapped?" she asked Mira.

She didn't ask the nymph how she knew Amber had been kidnapped by a dragon if nobody had been with Amber.

"Well, didn't we discover the Earth dragon could shape shift? If this one does as well, then maybe it could become a bird or disappear into crowds of mortals." Mira shook her head. "Too many variables. We need to find where it's hiding, and the Earth dragon already told us that it was in or near Iron Mountain. Amber was taken when she was in the northern part of Santa Fe." Mira hesitated. "Maybe... maybe I could locate Amber somehow."

"If it's going to take you out, then it should be our last resort," Rey replied. "We might not be able to negotiate with this one like the last."

Mira nodded. "You're right. And if we can't talk our way out of this, then we will need my ability to control fire and water."

"Absolutely," agreed Less. "We could try the mines. The tunnels could be the maze that the Earth dragon said he came from. Does anyone know why dragons like virgins? Is it going to eat her? How long do you think she has?"

Rey shook her head. "He said he came from beyond the maze. He could have been referring to the Maze your vampire friend led us through. As for why the dragon wanted a virgin, who knows. It's what they want in the stories." She shrugged. "But we can't just head into the mine without a map or some kind of plan."

"What about your friends who live on Iron Mountain?" asked Less, referring to the pack of werewolves Rey knew. "They might have noticed something. If we can narrow down the entrance, we might be able to track it through the tunnels."

Rey looked at Less. "My friends don't live on Iron Mountain."

"Oh, right, never mind."

"Shall we head to Iron Mountain, then? We could form a plan on the way."

"There are five entrances into the mountain that people know about," Rey said. "Of the three commonly known ones, two are boarded up and the third is the gate into the Duchy Hollow. I've got a pretty good idea where the others are."

"Aren't we going to need a magic sword or something?" asked Less. "Do any of the stories give any clues about how to defeat a dragon? I think we got lucky with the last one."

"I don't know," Mira sighed. "I just know I have to save Amber. I won't leave her with that thing."

"You're kidding, right?" Rey said to Less. "Dragons aren't supposed to exist, not in this world. Even if there were stories from the Hedge and Arcadia, it'd take time to research

them. Time we don't have." She shook her head. "Too bad Drake isn't here. His fighting skills could be a big help."

Mira looked at her blankly for a moment, then shrugged. "Well, I have no problem with us calling in anyone you think we can trust and can come without slowing us down. Can we go now?" Mira signed again, looking very anxious.

Rey stared at Mira for a moment and wondered what was going on. It was almost as if her friend didn't know who she was talking about. "Let's head to my place so I can change, and then I'll lead you to the closest of the entrances. I hope you're up for a hike. It's not on any of the trails."

"What about Richard? His magic axe would be very welcome here," said Less. "And I have no problem calling all the Seasonal Monarchs to request any and all firepower they have available. Or do you think a smaller band is better, tactically?"

"If you think you should do that, and they can be at my place by the time we're ready to go," Rey replied. "I don't think we can afford to wait any longer."

Mira just looked back and forth between them. Her "tactical" knowledge consisted of marching in and beating the crap out of a target until she blacked out and then woke up later hoping they won. On reflection she figured she could think it through if she wanted to, but she hated that kind of mental exercise. She liked much better to just be pointed at the nearest target and told to go to it.

Less considered the possibilities. It would take too long to organize an army. "Call Richard, then. I'll call the monarchs and tell them about the dragon and that we are investigating but they should prepare to act."

Rey bit back a snarl of annoyance, and hit speed dial for Richard's number as she headed for her car. The tone of Less' voice, along with her concern for Mira, made her angry. It was a little worrying that the call went direct to voicemail, but there wasn't time to wonder. She left a message, saying the brother of the dragon who had taken the vampire had taken Amber, and they were going dragon hunting, and that she'd call again before they went in after it.

The group piled in Rey's car. While Rey began driving to her place, Less was able to leave a message for Ishtar and Veridia. The Storm King answered directly, however.

"What is it, Winter." The lack of friendly greeting was in keeping with the Summer King's temperament, which had been stormy ever since the Queen of Spring had rebuffed his last attempts to court her.

"Something right up your alley, actually. There is a dragon in Mythic!" Less listened to the response. "That's right: flying lizard, breathes fire, steals virgins, the whole bit. We think it's got a lair in the mines of Iron Mountain. My motley is going to investigate and

hopefully rescue the woman it kidnapped, but if it all goes wrong we're going to need the Summer Warriors to be ready to protect the Duchy."

"There are four or five mine entrances, most of which cross paths," said Storm. "I have some people I can send now, and more a little later, but this sounds like a trick, that this may be a precursor to an attack on the Duchy Hollow. I'll summon Spring and tell her to prepare to defend it, but she doesn't have many fighters left. I'll personally reinforce her and including my own guard." It sounded to Less like the Summer King would enjoy the chance to "summon" Ishtar and give her a few orders during her rule. Few carried grudges like summer courtiers. "Where do you want my warriors? With you or checking other entrances?"

"It would be best if we met first to coordinate so we don't accidentally ambush each other. Hold on." He put his hand over the mouthpiece of his phone and quickly consulted with Rey about a meeting place. She suggested the dead end of Williken Road, a place to easily enter the state park, and a relatively popular one for the local kids.

Less relayed this to Storm. "But we are in a hurry so don't keep up waiting."

"Try not to get eaten."

Rey then contacted Doctor Tom and arranged for him to meet them at the same location. Rey parked her car at her house and while Rey went to change, Mira said she'd head down to the dead end and wait for the others.

After Rey changed, she grabbed her map book of Mythic and tore out the page with the state park on it. She marked two places on the map, the ones she and the motley were going to check out. She folded the map up and put it in an envelope, sealed it and wrote Richard's name on it. Grabbing her backpack that had a basic first aid kit, along with some chalk and glow sticks, she went outside onto the porch to call Richard as she said she would in her previous message.

Again, he didn't answer, but Rey wasn't worried. She left a message, telling him the motley, plus those who Summer sent to aid them, were heading into the abandoned mines in Iron Mountain. If he didn't hear from her in 24 hours, there would be an envelope in the grill on her deck with his name on it. It contained a map showing the approximate locations of the mine entrances they were going to check out. She finished her message with her love, and a wish that whatever he was doing, that he'd be careful.

She quietly put the envelope in the grill, and went back into the house to find Less. She found him testing a flashlight he'd found near the back door. "Ready as I'll ever be," he said as he dropped it into a pocket.

The found Mira pacing back and forth at the end of the road, Dr. Tom watching her silently. She looked up as Less and Rey approached, but she hadn't noticed the three people getting out of a car half a block away. Less and Rey did, though, and identified

them as Summer changelings: Teara, Drake, and a darkling named uncreatively Johnny Dark.

Of course it would be Drake and Teara. He clearly hadn't sent them on a distant enough goose chase. He stopped to head them off. "Rey, if we send the Summer team to the other entrance it would speed up the search."

Rey shook her head. "Not a good idea. Safety in numbers, and we have no way to communicate with each other once we're in the tunnels. If worse comes to worst, they can take Amber and run while we try to hold off the dragon." She glanced at the approaching changelings. "And the more bodies the dragon has as targets, the more time we have to deal with him."

Mira tugged on Less's sleeve to get his attention. "Who's that guy with Teara and Johnny?" she signed.

Instantly all of Less' mouths went dry and his stomach sank so fast he thought he might throw up. Why had he let the witch talk him into this magic!? He had only wanted to drive a wedge between Drake and Mira, not rework her memories. He was as bad as Xavier! He recovered slightly, and signed with his back to Rey while she was digging out the map. "That is Drake, he's with Teara. Try to be nice to him, but he is lecherous as hell. He'll try anything to come on to you (or anyone), but we have to focus on the dragon."

She nodded once and looked in the direction of the warriors of Summer. Her eyes narrowed suspiciously at Drake, her jaw already set defensively.

When the trio arrived, Johnny Dark asked, "Why are we here at this hour of the night? Why are you concerned about an allegedly powerful Hedge creature that's requires so much magic to survive in this world, it's likely to burn away by dawn?"

Teara was more pragmatic -- or perhaps simply tired of being sent by her King to run around on wild goose chases. She didn't care why the creature was here or why Less's motley believed it was a danger. She glanced at Johnny and talked over his questions. "Just point us where you want us to be and let's get this done."

"It can survive here," Rey said softly, "because somewhere in Mythic a Gate into Arcadia is open, connecting our world to Theirs. The Winter King, Mira and I defeated one dragon already. Another has made its lair, possibly in the abandoned mines in Iron Mountain. It must be dealt with."

Drake looked at Mira and, when he caught her eye, smiled at her. He was glad to see her, though he wished it was under better circumstances.

Teara looked at Rey. "That is impossible. No gate from Arcadia can open to this world. If there is such a thing, it would have to open through the Hedge."

Rey met Teara's gaze and held it, as her brambles rustled slightly and her wisps raced around everyone assembled at the end of the road. "That is the usual way of things," she said with a slight nod, "but this is the exception. The longer we stand here, the less time we have to find the dragon. Shall we go?"

Everyone agreed and they set out on the path Rey knew they would take for a little while.

Teara asked again, "Then should we not go and close this gate? Then the dragon would die and no more could come out."

"To close the Gate, you need the Key," Rey said, "and we have not yet captured it. It is an evil, sentient entity, capable of possessing people to do its bidding." As they walked, the Witch of the Bitter Wind told them about the murders the Key had committed, and her motley's battle with it at Marie's home, though she left out whose home it was and why they were there.

Drake fell into step beside Mira. "Are you okay?" he signed to her.

Less had wanted to prevent that. "Mira, we need to talk about what to do if we find the dragon and Amber." He beckoned her to fall back with him.

"The dragon has Amber?" Drake said aloud in surprise. "No wonder why you're so upset."

Mira was surprised a moment. This 'Drake' knew she knew ASL and knew it too. That was something even her motley mates didn't know, save for Rey. She guessed she'd signed enough at court it was common knowledge. He was probably trying to impress her. She had to admit it kind of did. Since she'd let Amber come with her to a court event, that she had a mortal friend was also public knowledge. That was something she had to get used to.

Mira nodded to then said in a firm, loud voice so everyone understood her very clearly. *"The priority is Amber. She gets out of this alive, no matter what. Whatever it takes, she's coming home tonight. But this dragon's brother was very powerful and not something we had the ability to fight. We have to be cunning. Stealth and misdirection have to be our tools. Winter King, I know you can be seen and heard only when you wish it. I'm relying on you free Amber and Rey, I'm relying on you to get her clear because you are faster than all of us when you want to be. I'll stand with Summer to distract the beast."*

She stopped walking and made the group stop, too, with a raised hand. She looked at Teara, Drake, and Johnny. *"Amber is my friend. I'll risk my life for her, but I don't expect you to do the same. If things go badly, you are to escape by whatever means necessary. The Duchy will need you."*

Drake nodded in understanding. Less was in agreement also.

Rey knew the closest mine entrance was the best-known as well as the one probably best secured against curious kids wandering in and getting hurt. The group went there first and found the cement wall intact and the heavy door still padlocked. Rey knew there was a less well-known mine entrance off the trail to the north east. It would take them well away from two other mines closer to the hiking trail but closer to the second, somewhat hidden mine.

The way was much more difficult, and Mira pushed to keep the group moving quickly, and it took another thirty minutes to reach it. This one wasn't sealed with a concrete plug, but it had been solidly boarded up and then a chain link fence covered the face of the entrance. Vines and other growth now had crept halfway up the fence. None of it looked like it had been disturbed for some time, so the group continued to the second mine entrance, located about halfway up the mountain.

Since they were off any hiking trail now, the going was slow except when they could use animal trails. Sticky burs clung to clothing and barbs and thorns stabbed at the members of the group as they pushed their way in the dark. It took an hour and forty minutes more, and a couple times getting lost and having to backtrack, when they finally found the second less well-known mine entrance. Here, they found the entrance overgrown with trees and tall grasses.

That's what gave it away. At this elevation all the other trees were very stubby, where they grew at all. Grass was also clumpy and of tough, pale green stuff. The vegetation here looked vibrant even at night.

When Less spotted piece of splintered wood, the group took a closer look and found the vegetation to be insubstantial -- an illusion of pure glamour put in place by someone who wanted to perhaps obscure the entrance from planes or helicopters.

The Winter King took the lead, at least until they knew where they were going. This turned out to be a pretty good choice because the mines were a maze inside, branching only fifty feet in. A closed elevator sat blocking a shaft at the junction, hinting that no one had been that way in some time. Less had to rely on his ears and sense of touch more than anything, looking for drafts that would reveal a path still ventilated enough to be breathable and listening for the occasional sound of some kind of animal mewling in the distance.

Here and there, Less saved himself and the party a deadly fall into a shaft where the lift appeared to have been purposely broken and the hole disguised by fragile boards. His sense of danger was on high alert --- and the for boding feeling only worsened as they went.

In this way, Less guided the party deeper and deeper into the mountain. They discovered long abandoned chambers so large, one might have fit several semi trailers inside. Several times, they had to make a best guess as to direction, but so long as the sounds didn't diminish, they were sure they were going in the right direction. Teara picked up a rock and occasionally scratched a mark along a wall or at a junction so they could find their way

back.

As the sounds grew louder, Mira identified them as Amber, probably crying. The cold tunnels also gradually became warmer the deeper they went. Mira looked uncomfortable, but Teara and Drake had no problem with it. To Less, it was rather warm, and it felt about 80 degrees to Rey.

Finally, they detected a dim, warm glow from far down the corridor. The floor was inclined down from horizontal at about ten degrees. Johnny moved forward and offered to scout. Teara took the light from Less and suggested they*both* scout -- and watch each other's backs. There was no telling what sort of traps might be about.

Rey crouched down, giving herself a smaller profile - and more difficult target - and kept an eye on their back trail.

Less looked at Johnny and nodded. He gestured for him to take the left of the tunnel, while Less took the right. Johnny would lead while Less followed to keep him in clear sight. Less wiped sweat away from key eyes before he began to inch forward, and down, toward the glow.

It finally revealed a massive natural chamber. But to get to the chamber one had to pass between three huge stalagmites that rose from the floor. They each glowed a different color. From right to left there was a yellow, red and a green glowing pillar. Intense heat radiated from them and while the entrance to the chamber was wide, the pillars forced one to make a choice: walk between the yellow and red one, or walk between the red and green one.

Less sighed inwardly. Even if the colours represented how hot the stalagmites were they still had to pass the red one. If he, or rather the dragon, was nautical he'd pick the red-green pair. The Hook had related everything to magical elements: red fire, yellow air, green earth, water sensibly left out. It could all be simply an illusion like the vegetation at the cave entrance. But in the end he had no way of determining anything about it. He crossed the tunnel to Johnny and whispered, "Unless you have some way of knowing what the colours mean, I suggest you go back and fetch the others. Mira might be able to determine what magic is involved."

Johnny nodded silently and slipped away. He returned with the others in tow a few minutes later, which gave Less time to try to see what was going on beyond the doorway. He noticed that the air between the yellow and red pillars wavered and rippled, making it difficult to see very far. The space between the red and green pillars, however, didn't ripple and he could see more clearly. By flattening himself against the side of the wall (but not entering the huge chamber), he could see a number of interesting features.

First, there appeared to be steam vents here and there, that occasionally jetted vapor from cones built of mineral deposits. It seemed to form a sort of mine field for half the chamber. Beyond that Less detected movement. A long, lizard-like tail twitched back and forth. It

was attached, of course, to the red-scaled dragon. Even at this distance, the creature was frighteningly large. It seemed to be considering or perhaps speaking with a tiny figure that rested on a ledge. If that was Amber, then it made the ledge's height probably 25' straight up from the floor of the chamber at the very back.

Less thought he saw two dark openings, much smaller than the one at which he stood, along the curved right wall of the chamber. It was hard to tell whether they were big enough to admit an adult person, and whether or not they were booby-trapped.

The arrival of the rest of the party interrupted Less's musings.

Rey looked at the pillars for a moment, then at Less to see what he had to say. Drake, who'd been walking at Mira's side, remained there and waited to hear an explanation of what they'd found.

Mira stared at the chamber beyond, then finally saw Amber at the far side. "*Amber!*" she said as she started forward.

Drake took a quick step and interposed himself between Mira and the pillars, putting a gentle finger on her lips. "Dashing in there headlong won't help Amber," he said softly, his own concerns about the girl plainly written on his face.

Mira looked taken aback. She blinked up at the attractive changeling a little astonished he would just invade her personal space like that. She wondered just who he thought he was, being so familiar with her. On the other hand, he was very handsome. What woman would really mind... She blinked some more. These thoughts were getting in the way of saving Amber.

Without her mind telling them to, her feet took a step back, away from the draconic changeling. She remembered what Johnny said about the pillars looking dangerous when he came to get them, then nodded. Drake was right -- if she walked into a trap, that wasn't going to help Amber.

Rey moved closer to the end of the tunnel to take a look at the pillars.

"I can see heat shimmers between the red and yellow pillars," said Less. "But that doesn't help us that much considering that is probably the safe path for the dragon. The other path is probably trapped against people not immune to searing heat."

Johnny pointed out, "Heat might not be a problem for the dragon, but it would be to the virgin."

Mira shot him an irritable look.

"Tha, ah, Amber, I mean. But the point remains."

Mira sighed and crept closer to the pillars so she could use her Witch's Gaze. She whispered, *"There is a field of fire magic stretched between the yellow and red pillars, like a fire elemental stretched thin but hot enough to incinerate anything that touches it. There is an illusion stretched between the red and green pillars which conceals nothing."* Mira frowned and squinted. *"Like a painting of a view in front of a window placed in front of the window. You see? So the viewer sees what they expect to, regardless of any changes might be going on beyond the painting."*

"So, what we can see of the dragon and Amber is fiction. We could find anything at all beyond the pillars," said Less.

Rey looked at Teara. "Do you think you might be able to deal with the fire magic?" she asked. "If you can't dispel it, perhaps disrupt it long enough for us to get through, without harming yourself?"

"There is one way to find out," Teara replied. She stepped up and held her arms out. She concentrated with great effort.

Mira reported, *"The curtain of heat has pulled away at the center. Go now."*

"I can't hold this!" Teara exclaimed in a hoarse whisper.

Mira then added her own strength and command over fire. "**We** can."

Rey moved immediately. "Let's go." Drake slid through the gap in the center, ready to deal with any threat there might be on the other side. Rey followed close on his heels. With an effort of will, Less turned himself invisible and hurried between the pillars.

While Johnny, Teara and Mira stepped through, the rest of the group was able to survey the surroundings in more detail. Before them was a veritable minefield of holes that periodically vented scalding steam. Beyond that, the dragon was closer than it seemed at first. He lay coiled up and apparently asleep next to his prize. Amber was chained to a stone pillar by manacles around her arms and legs that attached to massive - looking mounts. She hung limply there, but her head moved as she noticed the group at the other end of the chamber. She was too far away to see her expression, but she remained quiet.

Rey looked around to see if there were any other obvious exits to the cavern. Two black-mouthed exits stood in the distant wall to the right of the way she'd come.

Less began picking his way through the steam vents in a circuitous route towards Amber. The occasional venting of steam obfuscated even the faint sound of his footfalls.

Mira looked around, realizing she couldn't see Less anymore, but kept quiet, knowing he was doing his job. However, she was uncertain when she should make her move to distract the beast so the others could rescue Amber. She stared at the size of the dragon and swallowed hard. She glanced at Teara, Drake, and Rey. "Now?" she whispered.

Rey held up one hand for silence and to get Drake and Teara's attention. She pointed to Drake and flicked a finger, indicating he find a path off to the left. She repeated the gesture with Teara, though with a path closer to where the group was standing. She signed to Mira to take a path directly from where they stood, and then motioned she would take a path off to the right, circling around the room toward Amber.

Before they all moved off, she made sure she had Drake and Teara's attention once more. She pointed at the dragon, then put her hand to her mouth and pantomimed it breathing fire. It was the best warning she could give them, and an explanation of why she was spreading them out. They needed to minimize the number of their group who could get caught in a single fire blast from the dragon.

Drake looked from the dragon to Rey and Mira and, after signing "Good luck.", began to make his way toward the dragon. He had no idea what they might do to stop the beast, but they needed to give the Winter King and the Witch time to get Amber out.

Rey took a brief look at the ceiling, wondering how stable it was. If they could find some way to collapse the roof on their way out, it might be enough to stop the dragon, at least for a short while. She just hoped he had no idea what had happened to his brother, and who was behind it.

As Less neared Amber and the sleeping dragon he was having a hard time conceptualizing the size of the beast. He couldn't make out recognizable features on the massive scaled surface. Except for a strange colour and texture it looked more and more like a part of a landscape. He forced himself to pay more attention to Amber. He was wishing he had a better way to deal with the manacles she was chained to the wall with. It was slow going through the dangerous jets of scalding steam and too far to go back for help.

Johnny crept from shadow to shadow following Rey -- he decided his role would be backup.

Mira, Teara and Drake split and began approaching the dragon from different angles. They all moved quietly among the steam vents.

It was Rey who first caught the attention of the dragon.

The dragon whipped his head around, leveling a reptilian gaze at the Fairest. "So. A changeling intruder." It glared at her.

Mira stepped around a steam vent. "*No, sir. A changeling supplicant and her friend.*"

It turned its massive head toward Mira and took a giant-sized stride toward her. Mira held her ground. "Changeling thieves you mean! You'll not have my treasure, nor my virgin!"

Rey noticed Johnny Dark's face pop up from around a rocky mound eyes big as moon at

the mention of treasure. With a look of mischievous glee, he disappeared again.

"No, great one. We are too small and weak to steal from you."

The dragon stared at her as she spoke, attention riveted to her. Teara cautiously revealed herself near Mira. When the dragon had begun speaking with Mira she'd changed direction. If the dragon breathed fire, perhaps she and Mira working together could shield themselves from it. The fire elemental ignited her hypnotic flame, further focusing the great beast's attention on the two female changelings.

Seeing the dragon's attention focussed on Mira and Teara, Less quickened his pace slightly. He still maintained a state of hyper vigilance for danger and traps, but he needed to get to Amber and set about finding a way to set her free.

What are you up to, Johnny, Rey thought to herself. If you're going after that treasure, don't be stupid and take any. The diversion you'd cause might be the death of us all.

She took a slow, hopefully quiet, step to her right, all the while keeping one eye on the dragon and one eye on the ground.

Less arrived at Amber's side. The girl hadn't detected him either, but then he was invisible and also her best friend was just now trying to convince the dragon not to eat them. He noticed the manacles were of bronze. They were hinged and flattened where they came together. A bronze rivet had been pushed through holes and the end bent so the manacles wouldn't come loose. No one of Amber's strength would have any chance of bending the rivet or breaking it.

"Supplicants, you say? You look more like supplements, to me. Dietary ones." He raised a clawed paw and slammed it down on them. Mira and Teara only barely escaped being squashed.

Mira began humming as she sometimes did shortly before going into fighting mode. The dragon cocked his head, and then lowered it to stare at her.

The reaction startled Mira, but Teara grabbed her arm. "Don't stop, Mira! Keep doing that," Teara whispered.

Teara said, "As supplicants we offer you the first gift. The gift of song."

Meanwhile, Less called upon the Contract of Stone and with his magical Ogre strength, he attempted to unbend one of the rivets that kept Amber's manacles closed. He tried to do it stealthily so that even Amber wouldn't notice and cry out in surprise. His first couple attempts failed; he couldn't bend that bronze bit. However, he was subtle enough that Amber didn't notice anything -- impressive since she was known to be a pretty good thief and pick pocket. Her hands probably had gone numb in those restraints.

Less just didn't have enough leverage on the small rivet with his fingers alone. It was also very possible that the chain had been forged by the dragon, and therefore contained fae magics that made it stronger. Less decided he needed help. "Amber," he whispered directly into her ear. She jumped in surprise, but didn't make too much sound. "It's Less. We're here to help. I'm going to try to pry the chain apart but I need you to help pull." Less slid the tip of his umbrella through a leg-chain link near to where it was affixed to the wall and pried at it while Amber leaned on it with all her weight.

Amber nodded and together they worked to get her free. It still proved very stubbornly tough, so when Rey snuck over to them, her extra efforts were helpful. It still took what seemed a very long time to break four links attached to the manacles (Less didn't want lengths of chain dragging around behind her and giving them away), even though it must have only been a minute.

Things were rapidly going downhill for the changelings confronting the dragon. It seemed to grow suspicious all too soon.

"Enough!" it roared and swiped at them. Despite the fact both changelings had been ready for such an attack, the speed and power of it still knocked them both down. Teara looked a little bruised. "What are you up to?" it shouted in a voice loud enough to shake the chamber. Dust and small rocks rained down from the ceiling in response.

Mira spoke. *"Great dragon, as a suppliant I come to beg for the release of the virgin girl. I can offer you anything I'm able to give in exchange, only please consider my request!"*

Teara gave Mira a wide-eyed look of warning -- the nymph was treading on dangerous ground to offer such a thing to a dragon.

"And what do you feel you have that I would want?" the dragon said in mocking tones. "You are no virgin. You are far from innocent, so you are worthless to me. Your voice is sweet but untrained. You must be nearly tone deaf to think you could sway me with your paltry offering of song. You insult me!"

By this time, they'd kept the dragon busy long enough for Ambers final chain to be broken. The dragon was turning back to check on his prize when a rumble resounded from one of the chamber exits -- one of the two not taken by the changelings when they came.

Drake was quietly investigating them at the time. Dust and hot wind shot from one right in front of him, signaling the tunnel had suffered some cataclysm done the way. Drake also heard Johnny Dark's scream and the dragon's roar behind him.

"YOU DARE TRY TO STEAL MY TREASURE!" the dragon raved. He spewed fire from his gaping jaws and flooded the tunnel Drake was standing in front of with flames. Drake dove out of the way, but even being close to the flames burned him. Johnny Dark's fate would be far worse. Fortunately, he was able to remain out of the dragon's sight by hiding behind a thick stalagmite.

"The game's up," Mira said to Teara quietly. "Whatever Johnny Dark was doing, we aren't going to be able to reason with the dragon anymore. Rey's got Amber with her now. I need you to cover their retreat in case I can't hold its attention. If the dragon sends flames back up the tunnel after Rey and Amber..."

"Mira, how will you get out?"

"Steam vents."

"The heat will kill you!" Teara hissed.

"No. I control fire and water as well as ice. I know it's a slim chance, but I at least have one. You don't."

Teara frowned and hesitated. She watched to time her retreat with Rey and Amber's.

"Don't struggle," Rey ordered Amber. She picked the girl up in a fireman's carry, then called upon the fleet feet of the wolf to get the two of them out of there.

Less called to the zephyrs to give him speed. He didn't want to be left too far behind by Rey and Amber, but he also wasn't about to leave Mira to fight the dragon alone. He tried to spot Drake and Johnny to assess their condition and possible course of action. He spotted Drake crouched behind a large stalagmite looking for a route that wouldn't cross the dragon's line of sight. There was no sign of Johnny Dark.

Drake waited for any indication the dragon was no longer looking in his direction. Then, he decided, he would try to get out of there.

Less followed Rey the best he could through the steam vents but he waited to the side of the tunnel entrance. From there he might be able to use his control of air to deflect the dragon's fire-breath. He also got his potion out of his pocket. He wanted to hand it off to Drake as the warrior went by with instructions to use it to protect Amber.

Teara ran to catch up with Rey even as Mira called upon her most potent magic.

"Don't you turn away from me, dragon! I'm not finished yet." A vaporous elemental of steam congealed into a hulking, boiling water monster. It undulated over to Mira where it hunched, dwarfing the nymph.

Too many things were happening. The dragon noticed people it hadn't seen before running through its den and it howled in rage, bringing down more rock and dust from the ceiling. The rash beast would crush them all with its roars if this kept up!

It sprayed flames in a wide arc, hoping to roast all the changelings and even Amber on the spot, but the fire was much less effective so spread out. Skin was singed and hair set alight,

but there were no serious injuries. Less was singed as he strove to keep up with Rey.

Then Mira's elemental of boiling water slammed a fist down on the dragon's snout. The dragon howled in rage and turned on the elemental. Mira knew it wouldn't last long, but it was just the warmup. Less and Drake saw her transform, spending yet more reserves of power. Vented steam in the area around her froze and drifted to the ground as snowflakes as her body crystalized. She arched her back and threw her hands in the air as the explosive effect of her body of ice transformed her in an instant. A strange blue flame ringed her body like a halo.

While Rey and Teara disappeared down the tunnel, Drake continued to circle around. His couldn't leave Mira to fight this thing by herself -- she would have no chance at all. Moments, perhaps, no matter how tough her elemental form might be, this thing was more powerful.

Less paused at the exit, looking to see if he might be able to help Mira. He saw what Drake saw; a lone changeling about to face off against the dragon and accepting that she would probably die. Whatever she told Teara about her chances -- it had been a lie uncharacteristic of her. Mira, for all the powers she did have, turning to water and escaping through the steam vents was not one of them.

But Mira knew that if she didn't convince Teara to abandon her, the dragon would send fire after Rey and everyone else, and in that confined tunnel, they'd suffer the same fate as Johnny Dark. She couldn't let everyone die, so she lied.

As Drake started toward her to help, she saw him, and cried out, "*NO Drake! Get out of here! I'll be right behind you bending the fire away from us! Go!*" Of course, she didn't see Less, who was still invisible.

The elemental slammed watery fists into the dragon again, and managed to pull off huge, bloody scales from the dragon's snout. The dragon screamed in pain and rage as the searing elemental laid into it. It snapped jaws shut on the elemental again, despite the pain its body of scalding water inflicted. Just like that, the massive elemental was destroyed.

Mira came at the dragon from the flank, slamming frozen fists into the monster's scaly hide. It hurt enough to cause the dragon to whip its body around to face her. Less had to dodge falling stalactites as the creature's tail slammed the cavern wall and knocked more rock loose. Out of reflex more than anything, the dragon struck out at Mira, but it was a direct hit. She spun through the air and slammed onto a stalagmite. Drake and Less both saw it spear her through the middle. The swat was harsh enough, but the sharp stoney formation cracked her frozen armor and drilled right through her.

She pushed herself off, though, and got back to her feet. For a moment her back was to the dragon and she faced the space where, only twenty feet away, Less stood. Less could swear the Mira he knew was no longer in residence. The alien look on her face stabbed him in the space where his heart should have been; the Ice Princess.

The IP quickly took stock of the situation. She hadn't really seen Less, even though it seemed like she'd looked right at the place he was standing. Less was invisible. But she took note of Drake. She didn't recognize him as anyone she considered particularly important, though, and her eyes swept right on by.

Finally, she turned and face the dragon. The creature was in pain and in a rage. It roared at her and screamed. As it did so, it breathed fire again, forcing Less and Drake to dodge and run headlong for cover or be roasted alive. But the IP had control of Mira's spells and defenses she'd already put in place. The creature's breath was not a weapon to her, and she would not be harmed by it.

"Silence, beast," Mira said in a voice unlike her own.

The dragon's huge, squared-off ears pricked forward in surprise and it leaned down to get a better look at the IP. Its snout, bloodied and burned from his brief fight with the elemental clearly was causing it pain but something about the little humanoid before it made it pause.

"Do you not recognize me?" The Ice Princess waited.

The dragon's huge eyes swiveled and focused on her. The widened in surprise, then narrowed in anger.

"So. It is you. My lady." It added the last in a belligerent tone.

"I came to you in peace. You responded with violence. You. Struck. Me." The Ice Princess's voice was as hard and cold as ice. "I should flay the skin from your hide, beast! You will submit. Now. You will return across the Hedge and back to Arcadia, or I will rip your skull from your flesh and make a throne of it."

"This is not your domain, my lady. I am not in Arcadia, and I am not yours to command. Here, I am strong! Here I have power! It is I who will destroy you! I who will mount your bones upon my walls!"

Hoo-boy! This was going to get ugly. He felt that the Ice Princess could defeat the dragon, but at what cost to Mira's body? He had to do something. He flickered into sight just in front of the Summer warrior. "Drake, something from beyond the Hedge has taken Mira's body. It might recognize me so I may have a chance at negotiating a truce here before they destroy each other. Grab one of those dragon scales and go protect Amber as Mira wished. Take this potion. Drink it when you are with the others. It might help protect you from what is about to happen."

"What does it do?" Drake asked as he tucked the vial into the pocket of his trenchcoat.

"It will give you wings," replied Less quickly. His eyes were all on the pair of giants

squaring for a face-off. "Hurry! Iron Mountain may soon be a cataclysm. Get a scale. Even if you don't want to Spin it into a magic shield, the Bitter Witch could use it to fashion a spell to leash the beast."

Drake took one look over his shoulder at the tunnel, then ran toward Mira, reaching into his pocket as he did so. "Mira! The Winter King says this will give you wings!" he yelled as he lobbed the vial toward the Ice Princess, hoping she'd be able to catch it.

The Ice Princess caught it without a thought, more reflex than anything. She didn't have the luxury of time at the moment; she'd consider the elixir if she had a moment when the dragon wasn't focused on destroying her.

As she crouched to spring at the dragon, she called out in a clear voice. "Winter King. If she falls, place me in another."

Then she launched herself at the dragon, determined to make a grim accounting of herself so that the dragon will never forget. She landed on its neck, then gripped a scale and ripped it away with one hand while the other stabbed the dragon with freezing, deadly cold.

The dragon roared with rage and agony, but it was not going down yet. It reared up and slammed itself against stalactites hanging from the ceiling, trying to scarp the Ice Princess off. She was struck directly. The men heard her scream as it ground her against the stone. Ice rained toward the floor, tinkling like glass.

When the dragon shifted, she fell to the cavern floor with a broken, crunching thud and lay unmoving. The vial, still gripped in her gore-covered fist, rolled out.

The dragon snorted in spiteful defiance and rounded on the incoming Drake, inhaling in a preparation for a deadly fire strike.

"Mira!" Drake's dismay and anguish at seeing her fall echoed in the cavern. He drew both his swords and used stalagmites as steps to gain enough height to leap down onto the dragon's neck. His thrust bit deep, cutting deep into the side of the dragon's neck, and with a flick of his wrist, made a spiral cut that exposed the dragon's bones.

The dragon's scream of pain was suddenly cut short, as Drake slid down its side to the cavern floor and with a single swipe of his second sword, he slit the dragon's throat as he ran beneath it and raced toward Mira.

The dragon gurgled and rasped. "You'll not find my big brother so easy to defeat, changeling scum. He... willl... avenge... meeee..."

The dragon's breath was released as it died in an explosive rush that ripped the dragon apart and shook the cavern. Rumbles echoed in warning of the cavern's imminent collapse.

Less staggered to where Mira's body lay. He crumpled to his knees next to her, hardly daring to touch her to assess her condition.

Mira's ice form was melting away, revealing her normal mien. Less couldn't be sure, but it was possible she had temporarily torn away the Mask in her failed her ruse to trick the dragon. She didn't look good -- being crushed would have broken a lot of things inside. She likely had either moments or minutes before she was gone.

Drake quickly sheathed his swords and gathered Mira up into his arms. "Let's go!" He raced for the exit, cradling the nymph's body to his chest. "Hang in there my love. Don't leave me just yet," he murmured in her ear.

The elixir was there on the ground where it had rolled from Mira's limp fingers.

Less stored the vial as he watched Drake go. He managed to stand and look up at the cracking and crumbling rock formations above him. *What would it matter if he were crushed now?* Mira and the Ice Princess were surely gone. He wavered on a dark edge momentarily before the shining light of the Duchy welled up. For his duty to the changelings of Mythic, as king of the Winter Court, he would live. Despite the speed the zephyrs allowed him, he had paused too long to pass the steam vents and achieve the tunnel at the far end of the huge cavern. He grabbed a dragon scale to shield his head and dashed for the smaller tunnel where Johnny had met his end. He hoped that the tighter arch would survive the collapse. Once inside, he would try to recover Johnny's body - and maybe even cast his eyes on the dragon's treasure - before performing the ritual that would open a Door to his Hollow.

Less had to run hard and fast to clear the collapsing cavern, but his feet seemed to have wings of their own, despite the heaviness of his heart. Rumbling rocks rained down behind him closing the cavern and sealing him off from light. For a frightening moment, Less was faced with pitch darkness so thick he couldn't see the sides of the tunnel that were surely less than an arm length away. But then he noticed a golden glow dimly guiding him from somewhere up ahead.

He followed it. If there were traps the dragon still had here, he wouldn't see them. But then, Johnny had come this way, and the dragon had breathed fire after him. Would that not have cleared what remained of any traps? The question hovered over his head like an axe. But when he came across Johnny Dark's body, he knew there would be no more traps left here.

Johnny had been impaled by a crude, simple and yet effective trap of spikes tied to a wooden frame that had been driven against him by a device using rock as counterweights and ropes to move it. It had pinned him like the devil's own flyswatter, impaling him. He'd died helpless when the fire charred his flesh to the bone. Stiff and blackened, his remains were frozen in horrid anguish.

Having decided that he couldn't get Johnny's body free without some heavy equipment, he left him there. Less felt it was as much as he deserved for being such a fool. That left his hands free to explore the treasure room

Beyond him the warm golden glow of a brazier's fire lit a small cavern. Things treasured by an ancient and alien mind had been deposited here. Some were obviously old, things taken perhaps from Arcadia itself or robbed from residents of the Hedge. There was armor of some golden metal glittering on a crude wooden stand. A princely crown rested on the floor by itself as if discarded. A broke lance lay not far from it, and a sword shining bright as chrome stood sheathed in a bronze anvil. Other things were objects the dragon might have thought valuable in this world. There were hub caps of all sorts. A smooth stone table top that had impressed the dragon enough to have been torn from its place. A shiny new moped also sat on its kickstand, proper and ready for use. Bolts of silk, satin and other valuable clothes lay scattered on the floor along with unopened sewing supplies. For a moment, Less had to wonder; had the dragon intended to use his virgin to sew garments? What use was this for a dragon?

Lastly, there was a chest. It stood open and even from the entryway, Less could tell it was filled with hundreds of pounds of silver, gold, and gems. Piled on top were vials of liquids -- potions of unknown composition and purpose. On top of these were jewelry -- bracelets, necklaces, rings of every sort, all in gold, pink gold, and white gold with gems set in them.

One more thing drew his attention. There was a silver cage and inside it was a young woman. She was naked and shivering. She sat in the middle of the cage away from the bars. Her long, curly red hair hid her face. The cavern was cold; the girl had to be freezing. Squinting at the cage from where he stood, it did not seem terribly substantial. The bars were thin and it was small enough the girl could not have stood up. It wasn't much larger than a pet carrier for a large dog. There seemed to be no door, as well. It was as if the dragon had simply dropped it over top of his prisoner and left her there.

Less was shocked to find a living being here. He was moved to help her. The fact that Drake killed the dragon before he could find out what use it had for a virgin galled him almost as much as Drake preventing him from negotiating a peace. For all intents and purposes, for him, the Dragon-Slayer had also killed Mira and the Ice Princess. This girl might be able to answer his burning question about dragons and virgins - but a sense of danger cautioned his hand. *Why didn't she simply stand and throw off the small cage? Was it another trap for treasure-hunters?*

He knelt in front of her and looked closely at the cage without touching it. "Miss? What's your name? What happened here?"

She looked up at him. She had a pretty face and deep, blue eyes that looked far older than her body did. "My name is Imogen. I was taken by the dragon a few days ago from my sanctuary. I think I was not what he was looking for, and so he put me in this cage."

Imogen looked past him, as if checking to make sure no one was coming. "I heard sounds of fighting. Is... it dead?"

Less clenched his eyes closed, trying to shake away the images of Mira's broken body and Johnny's remains. "Imogen, a lot of people are dead." Something told him she wasn't mortal. "You can call me Less. Where is your sanctuary? Why did he take you? What is preventing you from escaping the cage?" He moved slowly around the cage while he asked his questions, searching for evidence of booby-traps.

"The dragon destroyed it. I have no place in this world anymore," she said sadly. "I can rebuild, though, if I'm free."

Imogen paused and shifted. She was curled up for modesty's sake, not that she could straighten anyway. Still, Less could see she was a very beautiful young woman. She wasn't someone you could forget, even if the circumstances were more pleasant.

"The dragon thought I was a virgin," she said. "As cliché and stupid as it sounds, he was actually furious when I told him I was not. He was very arrogant thinking he knew better. In the end I only succeeded in getting myself shut in this cage. I think he wanted me to make something of that material there because he kept making threats about not failing him and that it had to be perfect. The creature raved a lot."

She made sure to answer every question he'd asked, even though he'd asked many very quickly. She wanted him to know she was cooperating in every way so that he wouldn't leave her behind. "To prevent me from escaping he put me in this cage. He said his brother gave it to him, that it would prevent me from escaping. He was right. I think it has magic. I can't touch the bars because it burns me to do so. Even though it looks like silver, and that is not harmful. I thought it electrified, but I don't think that's right either because it didn't burn the dragon when he picked it up."

"I'm sorry to demand so much of you," said Less. "But I have encountered many things that wish me harm. I want to be sure that you are not some sort of servant of the dragon. Where was your sanctuary before it was destroyed?" He tried to drink her emotions: fear, relief. It was the only way he knew to determine if she were mortal, and he could use the Glamour.

He was able to get some Glamour from her emotions. Although there was an anxious edge to her gaze, she was remarkably calm and the magic he gleaned from it reflected that. "My sanctuary was a little cabin west of town on the side of a mountain. I lived there a long time, but the dragon flattened it when he kidnapped me. It didn't think anyone would find it. Maybe the universe is telling me I shouldn't be such a hermit." She tried a little smile.

Less had been trying to place her accent. Suddenly, with the little whimsy she tried to put in her last phrase, the lilt of the Irish came out. "I have more questions." She had been cooperating so he felt bad he wasn't helping her. He went over to the pile of sewing materials and tore off a few square meters of royal blue silk. Coming back to the cage, he

carefully poked a corner of the cloth through the bars for her to pull it through. "Why did you live all alone in the wilderness? You see how the lack of anyone to vouch for you would make me suspicious. Why hasn't the fact you were kidnapped by a dragon and kept in a magic cage reduced you to a gibbering lunatic? Why did the dragon want you as a virgin?" He supposed the dragon must have made his mistake because the woman had been celibate for a long time alone in her cabin. "Did the dragon make any further mention of his brother, or of gates, or keys? Do you know what the *Eochair Dubh* is?"

She gratefully took a corner of the silk and wrapped it around herself. It seemed to make her feel a lot better. "I was alone because I don't have any family. And I was just tired of people. I realize this has left me with a poor resumé.

"I screamed and screamed the first couple days, cried, and tried everything I could get the dragon to release me. I learned that it wasn't a good idea to have his attention. I had to accept my situation.

"As for why he wanted virgins, well I have no idea. Maybe he's on a strange, very strict diet?" Imogen shook her head. "That's sounds crazy, but then this whole situation is crazy." She shrugged. "Dragons aren't supposed to be real either, but that fact hasn't help my situation one bit.

"As to the dragon's brother, no. He was only mentioned because of the cage. I really didn't want to think about *two* dragons. One is bad enough. I didn't ask questions.

"But you mentioned a gate? That sounds familiar." She paused, thinking. "The dragon did mention something about a gate when he was raving at me. It didn't make very much sense. He said, 'I've passed the gate and come to this place, the one place there are virgins, and you're telling me you haven't been a virgin for...'" She trailed off, embarrassed. "Andy, that's what he said. He never mentioned a black key or any other key. That's what you said, isn't it? *Eochair, Dubh*? Black key? But yes, I've heard of such a thing. It's a very old Irish legend, very obscure. How did you come across the story?"

Being completely cut off from the world, most likely presumed dead, gave him a feeling of freedom and he was able to cast off the oppression of death to revel in a childlike glee he hadn't felt since he had first followed the Ice Queen into the Hedge. As he listened to the girl, he picked up the crown with the end of his umbrella and propped it on his head to replace the cloth cap he had lost sometime during the cave collapse. At the chest, he tried on rings and jewellery, squinted at potions in the glow of the brazier, and dropped coins into his pockets. "It came across me, actually. Dragons are real and so is the Black Key." He hurried back to the cage but backed off at the last second, remembering the magic barrier placed on the silver bars. "I fear it more than the dragon! It is wreaking havoc in the city and I must stop it or dragons won't be the worst thing that comes through the Gates. Tell me the story!"

Imogen hesitated, then cleared her dry throat. "I will, after we get out of this place. Over tea? After a long drink of water?" she asked. "Besides. If you defeated the dragon, and he

really does have a brother, maybe neither one of us wants to be here any longer than necessary."

Less didn't want to be unnecessarily cruel, but he also didn't want to be caught in a trap now that he had come this far. His fingers closed around the elixir in his pocket that had been meant for Drake and Teara. It seemed pointless to continue with that plan, but did he dare secure Imogen's help in this way? Surely a simple pledge would suffice? He released the bottle. "That sounds fair. Give me some time to prepare in case the cage is rigged with an alarm."

Though the most useful to him in the city was the moped, he decided he could buy one if he managed to pawn some of the jewels from the chest. He put on the armour, both for protection and to bring it with him, and admired himself in the rearview mirror of the moped. He truly looked the Fool in such gaudy attire, covered in jewels, with the crown crooked on his head. Using the Contract of Stone (since the moped could probably only barely tow a skateboard), he dragged the anvil over to the chest and parked the moped nearby.

Then he turned his attention to the cage. "I want you to pledge that if I free you from this cage you will not seek to harm or interfere with me until the next full moon. If you break this pledge you will be tormented."

Imogen had watched as he dragged the anvil with relative ease, but her face was a careful mask. She said quietly, "I believe you. I will promise ye that, and also promise to fulfill my offer to tell you what I know of the story surrounding the Black Key."

"Very well, the pledge is made," said Less gravely. He slid the wrought-iron tip of his umbrella under the edge of the cage and tipped it up so that Imogen could crawl under.

Imogen carefully crawled out from under the cage, careful not to touch the silver bars. With a firm grip on the cloth covering her, she stretched her back and legs to ease muscles cramped from days stuck in that cage. Less noticed she wasn't very tall, being around Mira's height or a little shorter. As she swept her hair back, Less noted she was practically a perfect specimen of female humanity. There wasn't a so much as a mole or freckle too darkly colored. There were no scraps, scratches or injuries of any kind that he could see, and not a single scar. She could have stepped right out from any of those glamour magazines where they airbrush the models until they became the unattainable goddesses of flesh the publishers meant them to be.

"If the dragon be dead, I suppose we can just walk out of here," she was saying. "Will you drag that anvil and sword all the way out of here? I recall we are some considerable way into the mines here and that cavern be full of steam vents."

"You suppose wrong, I'm afraid," said Less as he fumbled in his pockets for the various implements he needed for his ritual. Several of his eyes followed her every move and had the Mask not protected him, he would have had to be careful to withdraw several of his

tongues before she turned around. "The cavern collapsed. You know, some of this jewelry would look very good on you."

She looked at him, a little surprised. While the dragon was alive, stealing away had crowded out any thought of stealing the beast's treasure. Now she realized it wouldn't mind since it was dead.

"I figure it all be yours," she said, "since you defeated the beast. But if you're of a mind to share a little, I won't turn it away. Because of that dragon, I'll be living in a tent -- if it hasn't burned that up too. Even a tiny bit of this treasure would be enough to help me rebuild."

Less handed over a few bracelets and necklaces. Until she had some pockets the gold coins could stay in the chest. "I have to set up some magic to escape from here. Just sit tight on the chest, it will be a bumpy ride." Less had set up the ritual so that the Door to his Hollow would open up on the floor under the chest and gathered treasure. He grabbed the hilt of the sword tightly in one hand and performed the ritual that would take them home.

While Imogen watched with interest until the temporary Gate Less had drawn upon the floor suddenly and dumped them all unceremoniously into the heart of Less's personal Hollow. Everything landed with a bump, having fallen what seemed like just a couple feet, but had clearly placed them all in a completely different location.

Imogen looked around with wide, surprised eyes. She'd sensed his use of magic, but couldn't tell what he was doing or how he did it. It took a lot to surprise her; she glanced at Less with renewed respect. Not only had he rescued her, he had demonstrated great feats of strength and used powers she did not grasp.

Imogen froze, then slowly turned back to Less. Her eyes grew even wider and her breath caught in her throat. Less knew she was seeing his fae mien for the first time, revealed to her because they were now in the Hedge, where there was no Mask to hide his true features.

He could tell she was frightened. The way she clutched at the silk covering her gave it away. But she was managing it very well. Her hands did not shake, nor did she scream. The initial shock was fading quickly on her.

Less busied himself with removing the armour and jewelry. He didn't like having to reveal his true features to mortals but sometimes it was necessary. "I'm sorry I startled you with my appearance," said Less from one or two of his mouths, which did nothing to calm the girl. "I'll try to find something for you to wear and eat and drink. You shouldn't be here at all, or seeing any of this, but the alternative was leaving you behind." Less left the dragon's treasure carelessly where it lay. He beckoned for her to follow him. "The dragon and his brothers can not normally exist in the mortal world, for they are fae creatures. The Black Gates, for which we seek the Black Key, have allowed them to cross over from

Arcadia. I am a changeling, part fae and part mortal. My fellows and I are trying to close the Gates but the Black Key has a mind of its own and is fighting us. So, anything you can tell me about it would be a great help." They walked through a twisting tunnel dug between thick roots, some of which clung to strange bones. He came to a spot where water seeped out of the tunnel side and dripped down the roots. There was a battered pan placed to catch the drips. He offered this to Imogen.

When she had drunk her fill, they carried on. He took them through his vast network of tunnels and finally to where he kept most of his changes of clothes. He allowed her to browse for herself while he peeled off his own soiled and singed clothing and selected a dark suit probably dating back to the early '20s.

"You are a most charming person, sir," Imogen said respectfully. "I appreciate your telling me what is happening." She wondered if he was himself fae and if he was, whether the old stories were really true. Better safe than sorry, she had decided.

When he looked her way with one of his eyes, he saw she'd wasted no time putting on a simple shirt and trousers. She'd tied it at the waist the rolled up pant legs and shirtsleeves. She had hidden the jewelry he'd given her under the shirt to avoid questions when they appeared in the world again.

She caught his shirt sleeve. "You've been burned." She had noticed the minor injury. "Allow me to return the kindness. For the water." She touched his hand and it tingled. A strange energy flowed across his skin, soothing the minor but irritating pain. When Less realized it didn't hurt anymore, he touched where he'd been burned. It was gone, healed.

"Are you a witch, then?" he asked as he flexed his limbs, feeling the tightness of his skin loosened.

"I have been called that," Imogen said. "Usually right before someone did something really unpleasant to me out of fear."

"And that's why you live alone in the woods? There are several witches in Mythic. They have been very helpful, but so far my dealings with their magic have not turned out so well." Less talked while they walked. He needed to get back into cellphone range to let people know where he was.

"I be unlike other witches you have met." Imogen sighed. "Fair is fair. You have shown you are not human, but something different. Yet, still a gentleman to me. I can tell this is a secret you would like kept, and I will do so. I will also try to tell you what I am."

She tried to find words for it, but there simply weren't any. She tried to come at it from an angle he would understand. "Were you not curious why I had no clothes when you found me?"

Less shrugged. "I suppose it was on my mind but, unfortunately, in my experience,

captives are often naked." He thought of the slaves at the Goblin Markets. "And the rules of changeling society are a bit skewed such that nudity isn't necessarily out of place."

"When the dragon realized he'd been wrong, that I was not a virgin, he was furious as I believe I mentioned. But before he put me in that cage, he killed me. He burned me until I was nothing but ashes. Dumb luck prevented my spirit from returning to my sanctuary -- the devil had destroyed it without knowing what he had done. Instead, when I returned from the Underworld, I had to rebuild my body in the place I had been killed. I hoped to sneak away, but he found me just before I could slip between the cracks of the world and escape. He thought me a marvelous thing, then. He had his elder brother build a special cage to prevent my escape and put me there. I would surely have died again in that cage from starvation and dehydration had you not come along, and then my spirit would have been trapped. It might have been years or centuries before chance might have allowed my escape again."

"You're a dead thing!?" Less was surprised at his own reaction. "I'm sorry. You just surprised me. Vampires, after all, are dead as well. Why did you come back from the Underworld?"

"First of all, I'm very much not dead in any way. I know of what you speak. Trust me. I'm not one of the walking dead. Also, I have noticed that if the walking dead are burned, they are destroyed and stay that way." Imogen smiled as they kept walking. "Your second question is a very good question. The Underworld is the place of ghosts, the place where human souls go when they die. My soul is no longer wholly human. In order to do what I needed so long ago, I had to join my soul with spirits. You understand such necessities, do you not? Sometimes, sacrifices must be made for the good of all. That was mine. But the result is that where I once was a human and, as you say, a witch, now I am more spirit than human. But I'm not completely any of those things."

Imogen then said, "So, you are a changeling. A real changeling, like in the old tales? You are the first I have ever met. Does that make you pure fae, or once human, like me?" she wondered, trying to feel out if she was in more danger than she had realized.

"I was once human," said Less sadly. He could not help but be flooded with the fragmentary memories of his Ice Queen, of their denied love and all that she had stolen from him. "I am only partly fae. My kind were kidnapped by True Fae creatures and made into what we are today. Like I said, the True Fae are supposed to stay beyond the boundaries of reality, but the Black Gates are allowing them in." They walked a few steps in silence. "When did you die? The first time, I mean?"

Imogen kept her eyes focused far down the tunnel. She said, "August the nineteenth, in the year sixteen ninety two by current reckoning." Her voice was subdued, revealing deep sadness and pain.

"That is a very long time ago," said Less gently. "I was only taken in the 1940s. 1692 sounds like the Salem witch trials. You don't have to tell me, but August 19th was very

specific. Can you tell me what happened that day?"

"I could, sir, but that would not bring understanding. I would rather you understood. I haven't spoken of it in a long time so I need to gather my thoughts a little. Can we talk about it when we have left this place? Perhaps over that cup of tea?" She didn't seem in a rush to tell him, but then she was a very measured person from what he'd seen. It would be out of character for her to make any rash or ill-considered action.

"Yes, of course." They walked for some time more through different rooms and tunnels of all description. Eventually they came to the ladder that led up to his office at the train station. He pushed his chair out of the way and crawled out from under his desk and turned to help Imogen up. "If you'll excuse me, I need to make a phone call." He let Imogen browse around his tiny, windowless office while he called Rey.

Once clear of the falling debris, Drake checked on Mira. He found her pulse weak and fading. She'd stopped breathing, but after a little CPR she was breathing on her own again, but he didn't know how long. He began seeing to her injuries, binding what he could see was broken and what was bleeding. He couldn't be certain moving her wasn't making things much worse, but the others, including Doctor Tom, waited somewhere ahead. He couldn't afford to run to get them and bring them back because if his quick first aid had failed, she would be dead before he could return.

Gathering her up again, he moved off. Traveling quickly but carrying her as delicately as he could, he wound his way through tunnels and caverns with a bit of Summer glamour lighting his way. By the time he saw a grey spot up ahead he knew that the end of the tunnel was nigh; and so was dawn.

Drake continued to run, slowing down as he reached the exit. He didn't want to run into anyone, or land in the thorny bushes a few yards away. Rey heard him coming before she saw him emerge from the tomb-like mine. "What happened? Where's Less?" she exclaimed, taking in both Drake's bloodspattered form and Mira's injuries.

"He said he'd be right behind me," Drake said between breaths. "And Mira decided to take the dragon on one on one."

Teara threw him a look. "She bought us time to get away. She meant her sacrifice to save us all -- which you very nearly wasted." The fire elemental had always run hot and cold. In the heat of the moment, she obviously wasn't feeling very generous.

Drake shook his head, not taking his eyes off Mira as he carefully set her down. "The dragon defeated her, and would have come after us. I couldn't leave her there to die."

Rey watched Drake for a moment, then waved Dr. Tom over. "What can I do to help you?"

He waved her away, muttering something to himself that was hard to hear and harder to understand. He set his bag down, knelt where Drake had laid her and frowned. The grizzled old changeling then picked up her hand and kissed the back of it. There must have been a bit of magic in that, because Mira immediately gasped and opened her eyes.

"There we are. All done." He put a few berries in her hand and told her, "Eat two of these and call me in the morning."

He shut his case and then began examining the others. Most had some burns of one form or another, for which he distributed some ointment, saying they'd heal without a scar if they used that over the next couple days. When he was done, he snapped shut his case and then asked, "So. Where is the Winter King and Johnny Dark?"

"Johnny is dead," Drake said. "He went after the dragon's treasure." He looked back over his shoulder down the tunnel. "I don't know where the Winter King is. The dragon exploded when I slit its throat, and the cavern was threatening to collapse."

Amber sat next to Mira. "Thank you for coming for me," she said weakly. "All of you." It was the first thing she'd said since Rey had put her down. She was definitely in shock over the whole ordeal.

Mira hugged her friend. It was a few moments before she could think of other things. When she did, Less was foremost on her mind. "Guys, we have to go back and look for him. He could be hurt or trapped, or both."

"Can you watch over her?" Rey asked Dr. Tom. The good doctor nodded.

Rey stood. "Let's go, then." She turned and headed back into the tunnel, followed closely by Drake who lit the way.

Mira stood and followed Drake, and so did Teara.

They traveled once more into the labyrinthine mines. It was a long trip, but at last they found the dragon's cavern. enough rock had fallen, however, to seal the entrance. It looked like it would require heavy equipment or a lot of tools or both to get inside.

"Oh no," Mira said mournfully. "Less..."

Teara shouted, "King of Winter! Can you hear us? Winter!"

"There were two other exits," Rey said, refusing to believe Less hadn't managed to escape. "He might have gotten into one of them before the roof collapsed. If he did, he can create a ritual doorway and get out of there. We just have to wait. And hope."

There was no response to Teara's shouting. Mira was exhausted and had not a scrap of

magic left in her. She slumped. *"I feel like I failed him,"* she said aloud.

They turned to trudge back. Mira had to ask, *"The last thing I remember was being thrown on that spear-like piece of rock. Who saved me? I thought everyone had left to get Amber clear."*

"I did," Drake replied. "I slew the dragon, then carried you to safety when the cavern started to collapse." He paused for a moment, then continued. "The Winter King gave me a potion, telling me it would give me wings. When you pulled yourself off the rock, and confronted the dragon again, I threw it to you. He took you down before you could use it."

She put a hand on her hip. *"Then I'll thank you for that,"* she said. *"But I'd thank you more if you had killed the dragon before it pinned me like a bug on a stalagmite."* She wore a little smile to soften the criticism. *"I hurt in places that I'm not sure have anything to do with getting speared,"* she added a little under her breath.

"When you pulled yourself up off the stalagmite, the Winter King commanded me to follow Rey and protect Amber," Drake said. "Told me that you were possessed by something from the Hedge, and that he would try to negotiate a truce." He shook his head. "I couldn't leave the woman I loved there to die." The look in his eyes supported his words.

Mira stopped walking and stared at Drake. *"Pulled myself off... ?"* She blinked. *"Possessed? Love? What the hell are you talking about?"*

"Which do you want explained first?" Drake asked, watching Mira's face.

She looked him right back in the eye. She saw what was in his eyes, but didn't understand it. She meant to say, *Why are you looking at me like you want to kiss me?* What actually came out of her mouth surprised herself. She had no idea why she said, *"Stop looking at me like that."*

She looked very troubled and frowned. She paled in the warm light Drake had provided.

"What do you mean, why is he looking at you like that?" Rey couldn't believe what she was hearing. "You've been together for a couple of months, and I'm sure have done more than just kissed. Heck, Mira, you broke it off with Remy to be with Drake."

Mira stared at Rey, then looked at Teara and finally back at Drake. Terrible dread and fear came with the realization in her eyes. *"Oh god. Not again..."* She backed away, unsure of anything anymore. Was she even who she thought she was? Had someone been in her head -- again? Panic overwhelmed her. Drake said she'd been possessed. Was she still? She backed away from them, ready to flee the moment something else seemed wrong. It was the only thing she could think of to protect them.

Drake held his hands out to Mira, palms up. "Mira, don't run. Please. We can work through this together."

"He's right," Rey said softly. "We can figure this out. We'll talk to Less, see what he knows, and then do what it takes to set things right again."

She put her back against the wall and slid down, holding her head. *"I need to know what you know. What did he mean, that I was possessed? Who would do this to me? Take my memories away? I told Minerva I wanted to keep my memories. She wouldn't..."*

Rey sat down on the cold tunnel floor beside her. "I don't think she'd do that." She mentally crossed her fingers. "Why don't we go back to my place to talk."

"I'd come with you," Drake said as he squatted down next to the two women, "but we need to report to our King, about the dragon and vengeance of his older brother." He reached out to gently stroke Mira's cheek.

Mira accepted his sympathy and the wetness he felt on her cheek was real.

"I think you should stay," Teara said. "I'll tell the King what happened. And about Johnny."

"Do you want me to stay?" Drake asked Mira, fully ready to do whatever it was she wanted.

"I need you to stay," Mira said. *"I need to know what happened after I was thrown on that stalagmite and only you and Less were there to see."*

"Then I'll stay with you," Drake said with a nod. "I'll just need to clean up a bit." Most of the dragon blood was splattered on his trenchcoat, but it was also on his face and dried into clumps in his hair.

"Would you mind if I got some of that blood?" Rey asked. "It might come in handy later."

Drake gave her a cautious, almost crept out look, but after glancing at Mira, nodded. Rey used a comb to carefully remove as much of the blood from his hair as she could into an envelope she had in her backpack, then handed him a bottle of water and package of wet wipes. He cleaned himself up quickly and efficiently, and tucked the dirty clothes into the plastic bag Rey offered him, which she then tucked into her backpack for disposal elsewhere.

Mira had watched. By the time he was done, she had regained her feet and indicated she wanted to hear what he saw after she'd been pitched upon the rocks.

Drake described what he'd seen and heard in detail, including how she'd looked at him as if he wasn't more than a speck of dirt. It hurt his pride to say it, but at the moment, helping Mira was more important.

"I don't remember any of that. Sometimes if I'm hurt, I black out. I guess I sort of go berserk." It was the only explanation she had.

Rey shook her head. "I don't think so. When you go full on in your war form, your ice-made body, your personality seems to change. I've noticed it before. You become colder, if you'll pardon the pun. But never out of control. And I've never understood why your most dangerous form is ice, when you're a nymph."

Mira didn't seem to think that important. "*I never take water form. It's only good for retreat, so I don't bother with it. Most of my power comes from water, and ice is part of that. It's much tougher, and I can make it so cold to the touch that it burns.*" She shrugged. "*There is no mystery why I take ice form as my primordial form. It's simply more practical. I also don't always black out when I do. Only if I've been hurt. Or my friends.*"

"Well, something gets you up and moving again," Rey said firmly. "And we need to figure out what it is that's doing it."

"Would you be willing to try hypnosis?" Drake said to Mira. "It might help."

"*I don't want to be in a situation where someone has control over my mind like that. The thought of being alone in a room with someone with that kind of power makes me feel like panicking.*"

"You wouldn't have to be alone," Rey said. "One of us could be with you."

Mira considered but still wasn't sure. "*I'll think about it,*" she said. She cast a cautious look at Drake as they started back to the mine entrance again, then looked ahead. "*I know you remember things about... us that I don't. I'm sorry.*"

"No need to apologize," Drake said softly. "We can create new memories. If that is what you wish."

It was all very overwhelming to her. Mira was quiet the rest of the way out of the mines.

"There were two other exits to the cavern," Rey said. "One was the treasure chamber, so that was likely a dead end. The other may have been another exits. We should see if we can find it. Maybe it wasn't blocked by the cave in."

Mira nodded, but was silent. She couldn't think of any way to do that and was simply too exhausted, mentally and physically, to imagine how that might be done.

Shortly after emerging from Iron Mountain, Rey's cell phone rang.

"Thank god, Less," Rey said, "Are you okay?"

"Singed and bruised," he replied. "I got into a side tunnel and only just now got cell reception. Mira? Is she...?"

"She's up and around," Rey said. "She's got one wound that's still needs to be healed, but she'll likely be able to deal with that with some goblin fruit in the Hollow. Drake's quick actions saved her life. There's somethings else, though. We've discovered that someone has messed with Mira's mind again. Whoever it was erased every memory she had of Drake. She's really freaked out about that, and what you told Drake about her being possessed. I don't blame her."

"She's alive!?" Less couldn't really believe it. His emotions, though sluggish to get going, boiled now to the surface in a confusing mix. He had feared her lost forever to death. But now she lived but he would certainly lose her now to Drake once again, and the Ice Princess remained trapped within her. "Are you sure she doesn't just have trauma from her injuries? They were severe. When she got up again I feared the Key had gotten her."

"No," Rey replied, shaking her head though she knew Less couldn't see it. "She was acting weird around him before we went into the mountain. I think it happened before tonight."

"Maybe. She was under a lot of stress what with Amber being taken and being in charge of the rescue. But if you think something is there, who was she with before Amber was taken?"

"No idea," Rey said as she glanced at Mira. "Now's not the time to be asking, though. We're all exhausted."

"Too tired to hear the story of my escape?" he asked, glancing at the beautiful Imogen perched on the edge of his desk. "Are you all going back to the Hollow?"

For her part, Imogen remained politely quiet. Emerging in his office had somehow reset Less's human illusion. She knew he hadn't done anything in terms of using some unseen power; she'd have sensed it. Even though it seemed miraculous how he'd transformed to looking like any other human being, the transformation had been as seamless and natural as a chameleon changing color. That meant that a changeling's true identity was protected naturally, as much a part of them as it was part of a werewolf to change shape. Still, knowing that it was just part of being a changeling made it no less interesting to her.

Speaking of tales, Rey was getting poked in the side by an anxious Mira. She'd been silent until now, but she couldn't keep quiet. "*Is Less okay? How did he get out? Where is he?*"

"Just a sec, Less," Rey said, then covered her phone. "Less is singed and bruised, he said he escaped through a side tunnel, and he wants to meet up at the Hollow."

"Well, if it's all the same to you, I'd rather wait until I have at least a little magic again before I return to the Hollow."

"I completely understand," Rey replied, then spoke into her phone once more. "No, we're not going to the Hollow. Mira wants to recover a bit more first. Did you want to meet up at my place?"

"Okay, sure, if you're feeling up for it. I'll need an hour or so to take care of some things and get over there."

After he had hung up, Imogen said, "I hope I'm not in the way. We can have that tea some other time if you need to go."

"Not at all." Rey had hung up before he'd had a chance to tell her about Imogen. "You need a place to stay and all that. I'll get you a key to my place for the time being until you can sort yourself out." He refused to listen to protest. He would stay elsewhere. "How do you feel about meeting more changelings tonight?" he asked. "There will be tea and you could tell us all the story of the Black Key."

Imogen thought about that, then showed him a smile. Her smile showed no teeth and seemed a rare thing, as if it was something she was sharing only with him. "It's the least I can do."

Mira was glad for the suggestion to go to Rey's house the trip was short and soon asked for use of Rey's shower. She had spare clothes in Rey's guest room to change into afterwards. Her own blood had stained the clothes she was wearing in crimson streaks and had caked on her skin.

Doctor Tom seemed energetic as always, but Amber was pretty obviously going to pass out the moment her head hit a pillow. Rey urged the girl to lie down in Rey's guest room, and she set up the futon while Mira was in the shower.

Rey then called Richard as she said she would. The cell phone popped with static, then went dead. When Rey looked at her phone, it showed 'No Signal'. Rey frowned, and picked up the receiver for her seldom used land line. She heard a dial tone, but it too crackled with static. She dialed Richard's number and she got a recorded message saying his number could not be reached. Rey left a message, saying Amber was rescued and the dragon in the mountain slain, but bigger troubles were on the way, and that he should call her as soon as possible.

When Mira was finished in the bathroom, Rey took a quick shower, then applied the salve Doctor Tom had given her. Dressed in clean clothes, her hair still damp, she set her kitchen table with food and drink for those who wanted it.

Drake also took advantage of Rey's shower, and changed into a pair of bike shorts and a tight t-shirt with "Alfieri Fencing School" blazoned across his chest. When he was done, he offered to drive Mira and Amber home once they'd spoken to Less, which they gratefully accepted.

The trip to Rey's house from Less's office was less than ten blocks, and Imogen didn't mind the opportunity to stretch her legs a little more. The way over turned out to be much more interesting than it should have.

They first realized something was wrong when they passed the old school yard. They'd already passed it by when they realized lights around the block the school occupied were all out. A closer look showed the schoolyard to be completely overgrown with tall bushes and weedy plants. The building itself had been overtaken by thick vines barely visible in the early dawn light. The street to the east of the property that separated it from the shopping center and theaters was broken up by thick roots. A tree had even burst through a sidewalk in there.

Early morning joggers listening to earphones crossed to the other side of the street and continued as if they hadn't noticed. No signs warned cars the overgrown street was closed, yet cars turned onto other streets to go around as if it was perfectly normal.

Although other pedestrians and drivers didn't seem to react as if anything was out of the ordinary, Less and Imogen both noticed. They exchanged worried and astonished looks. They needed to find the rest of the motley.

When they arrived at Rey's house, she noticed Less had brought an ill-dressed friend wearing a man's slacks and shirt with sleeves and pants rolled up. "Who's your friend?" Rey asked, keeping a frown off her face as she bit back an exhausted yawn. She was tired, and feeling cranky, and an unexpected guest was extremely low on the list of things she wanted to deal with right now.

"Rey, good morning!" Though Less hadn't slept either, his survival of the cave-in and his experiences in the treasure room had given him a powerful second wind. "Rey, this is Imogen. Imogen, this is Rey." Introductions over, Less got straight to the point. "Rey! The Key is here! The whole block the old school occupies is overgrown with trees and bushes, all protected by the Mask."

That was less than a half dozen blocks from Rey's home.

Rey glanced at Less, asking him silently if they could talk in front of Imogen. At his nod, she shook her head. "No, it's not the Key that's doing that. It's the influence of the Black Gate. The longer it's open, the more of Mythic will be subsumed by it until the city is no

longer part of this world. You need to get your people looking to see if this is happening in other places." Rey stepped back out of the doorway to allow Less and Imogen to enter the house.

Imogen followed Less closely, looking around. As they passed the kitchen on the way to the living room, Imogen couldn't help curious looks at the modern appliances.

Mira came out of the guest room, her hair still wet but dressed in a sharp business suit. "Less!" She gave him a hug and said, *"Thank the powers you are safe."*

Mira's enchanting voice dragged Imogen's eyes toward her. The red-haired woman looked at Mira curiously for a moment before she turned her attention back to Rey and the other man in the room. "I'm pleased to meet all of you. I am very grateful for what you did, taking down the dragon."

Mira looked at her with sharp interest. *"Some of us nearly died fighting that dragon. One of us did. Are you saying you are indebted to us?"*

Imogen hesitated and cast a look at Less.

Rey remained quiet, but watched Imogen as closely as a wolf would potential prey.

Less clung to the hug as long as he felt was possibly suitable. He had much to say but jumped in to prevent any unwanted pledges. "Imogen is very grateful, I'm sure. When the cavern was collapsing I couldn't pass through the steam vents and had to take shelter in one of the side tunnels. Imogen was a captive there, kept as one of the dragon's treasures! She has information about the Black Key." He turned back to Mira. The wetness of her hair soaking the back of her shirt was cold to the touch. It wasn't the slick burn of ice, but the sensation calmed him at his core. "I thought we had lost you, Mira. The dragon did so much damage...but here you are leaping about. Dr. Tom has paid his motley dues a hundredfold!"

"Yes, he has," Mira agreed. *"I feel awful about Johnny Dark. I think it's bad of me to say, but I think his ambition for dragon's treasure doomed him, especially since he abandoned us in order to pursue it."*

There was sympathy for Imogen's eyes. She knew the fate that must have befallen Johnny all too well.

"It was Mira and Drake who slew the dragon," Rey added softly, gesturing to the other Fairest in the room. "Less and I worked to free Amber, the young woman he'd kidnapped earlier tonight. Another woman, Teara, helped as well, acting as backup for us all. She's not with us, as she has warning to deliver." Her head tilted slightly to one side as she looked Imogen over again. "I suspect the dragon was not a very good host. I have food and drink, if you are hungry." She nodded at the table in the kitchen, laden with a wide variety of food and drink.

Relief showed on Imogen's face. She tried not to let it seem too obvious that she was starving but had limited success. "Yes, very. Please."

A little knowing chuckle accompanied the smile on Rey's face. "There's plates and cutlery on the table. Take whatever you'd like to eat. It'll take a couple of minutes to heat the stew up in the microwave. To drink I've got water, lemonade, milk, if Hamilton hasn't drunk it all, and some beer and wine. I've got coffee and tea too, but we'll need to heat the water first."

"You are very kind," Imogen replied. She was careful in her selection of what to eat because she didn't want to overdo it as her body was demanding and end up making herself sick. She selected a glass of milk and fixings for a sandwich as well as some fruit from the refrigerator.

Mira thought it a good excuse to feed everyone and got to work making sandwiches for the rest of the changelings. She put the pot on for tea, as well, knowing Less would appreciate it.

While Mira was busy with making a light meal for everyone, Imogen asked, "Is Hamilton a changeling, too?"

"No," Rey said with a slight shake of her head. "He's my familiar. What makes you think I'm a changeling?"

"Deduction and implication. Less implied you might be a changeling when he told asked me how I felt about meeting other changelings. I deduced you were a changeling in this way," Imogen explained.

"I have noticed you are the sort of person to look a person in the eye when you speak to them. You are smart and strong, and don't hesitate to look a person in the eyes. Yet, you do not look at Less in the same place humans have eyes when you speak with him. But yet, I think you *are* looking him in the eye. One of them, anyway. I know he has many eyes, none of which are in the same place as a human. It's part of what makes him special; a changeling. You would look him in the eyes when you address him. You see his eyes -- his real eyes. Therefore, you must be a changeling."

"Imogen is a sort of a witch," said Less. He would let Imogen tell her story when she was ready. "She can see the plants and trees growing around the school. I explained to her about the fae, dragons, and changelings and that I would introduce her to my changeling friends so that she could tell the story of the Black Key to us all at once. I trust her."

"I should tell you about the dragon's treasure!" exclaimed Less. He hadn't been able to tell his whole story with all the introductions. "Besides Imogen, it had a massive pile of hubcaps and a shiny new moped!" He was deliberately playing with their expectations. "And some stuff it must have taken with it through the Gate - some fancy armour, and a

huge chest full of gold and jewels. I lugged it all to my Hollow. We're rich! Or will be if we can manage to close the Gates. I can't wait to show you guys."

Rey stared at Less, finding it hard to believe that one of the most suspicious and paranoid people she knew trusted this woman he'd met only a few hours ago. She muttered something under her breath, then poured herself a large beer from the growler in the fridge before snagging herself a chair near the table. She took a long drink from her glass then sighed, obviously making an effort to fight off her foul mood.

"Imogen, can you see my true face?" Rey asked curiously.

"No. At least, not here."

"Alright." Rey now had confirmation of how Less had gotten the two of them out of the dragon's treasure chamber. The clothes Imogen wore, being decades out of style, was another clue. Her gaze wandered for a moment, watching one of her wisps examining Imogen, before returning her gaze to the woman's face. "Then how did you manage to see the plants and trees growing around the school? Generally, only fae creatures and those gifted with the ability to see past the Mask."

"Maybe they are not Masked. Or the Mask is stretched so thin that people only tend to avoid it rather than not see it. I can't be sure. I do see much more than average people."

Rey nodded. "Do you feel up to telling us what you know about the Black Key?"

Imogen nodded. "It would be my pleasure." She finished her milk and Mira replaced it with tea.

"My mother was fond of telling stories about the old times in Ireland, before the British under Cromwell came. She had a lot of them, mostly fables and legends, but they were part of a heritage I never really got to see since I grew up on Barbados with my parents. I always listened carefully. I was a little sponge for tales like that, the stranger the better.

"As she told it, the *Eochair Dubh* was part of an ancient legend of fairie nobles called the *Tuatha de Daanan*." She pronounced it like Too-ah day dan'an. "They are said to be a people that lived in Ireland before the coming of the first Irish, the Milesians, as they were called. They were people of vast power who'd banished twisted, monstrous folk that lived there even before the Tuatha's coming, but they had a weakness of iron. With iron, these fairie nobles were driven from the lands. But that's a different story. I mention it only as background for the story of the Black Key.

"You see, when the Milesians drove out the fairie lords, they also drove out much of the magic the Tuatha had brought with them. This was locked away with the Tuatha in their faerie mounds, or so it is said. The same stories suggest the mounds act as gateways to the lands of faerie. This may be true, but I don't know for certain. I have never been to Ireland.

"But there is one story that be very different from the usual stories of those times. One story says that the fae lords be locked up by a symbolic gate, a Black Gate. A sacred group of priestesses, of which I was told my great gran was a part, had been tasked from ancient times with the sacred custodianship of the Black Key. My mother said that if the Black Key was ever loosed back in the world, then someone might open the Black Gates and let the Tuatha de Daanan. And so this group of priestesses stood guard for the safety of all. She had a lot to say about the priestesses, that they often had magic powers. My mother thought such things to be of the devil, though, so she didn't tell me very much. She thought the priestesses did a good thing but used evil methods to accomplish it because they had magic and magic only came from the devil. My mother was very Catholic.

"My gran was very old when my parents left Ireland. She was killed there and I never got to hear the stories from her directly. But my mother mentioned she thought some of the priestesses escaped Ireland when the purge happened and were sent to the Americas.

"I suspect that they lost the Black Key centuries ago during that purge, but secret societies like these have a way of preserving their secrets and passing them down through the generations. I believe they may still exist. If they do, they may prove a powerful ally in your quest to recover the *Eochair Dubh* and seal the Gate."

"That's the catch," Rey said. "Do you know what name the priestesses went by? What they called their group?"

"No, but that doesn't matter. They'll have changed the name of the group several times over the years." Then Imogen added, "But I do know one thing for sure. If they still exist, they'll be here in this city. Now."

"That still doesn't help with trying to find them. Unless you have an idea?"

"I'm certain I can find them for you," Imogen offered.

"That is certainly better than waiting for it to find us again," commented Less. "I'm sure these priestesses would be interested in meeting Mira. She can detect it and has some sort of deep connection with it."

Imogen studied Mira for a moment while Mira pretended she wasn't there.

"I think that's pretty likely," Imogen agreed.

"What makes you think the priestesses would already be here?" Rey asked, "And how would you find them?"

"Because the Black Key is here. If there were supposed to be its guardian's then they will be looking for it and the kinds of things it does. It will have drawn them here," Imogen stated. "I'd locate them via my contacts. They're gifted, according to my mother's stories, special. That will draw the attention of certain entities."

Mira asked, "Why would you take on the risk of finding them for us? You told us your story; your debt to the rest of us is done."

"Because from what I saw tonight, and because of that dragon, it's obvious to me this be everyone's problem, not just yours. If the Black Gates aren't closed, these *Tuatha* may return and I don't think that's going to end well for anyone. No one even believes in faerie tales anymore. They'll be defenseless against a return of the Old Ones." Imogen shook her head. "I would do it regardless. It's the only way I know I can help."

"Perhaps you could arrange a meeting between them and I," Rey said. "Amongst our kind, one of my duties is to help deal with supernatural situations and threats to my people in this world." She looked at Mira. "Do you want to meet with them?"

Mira made a face. "*I doubt I have a choice.*"

"I had planned on locating them and then just telling Less. But I could make contact and try setting up a meeting," said Imogen. Every time Mira spoke, she found it difficult to think straight. It was very intriguing but something in the back of her mind warned her it could be dangerous to let Mira lure her into something. She wondered if she might be some kind of siren. If so, it seemed odd she was living in the middle of New Mexico. Weren't they supposed to live in the sea?

"I would appreciate it," Rey said with a slight nod of thanks.

Less was at the point where he couldn't stop his mouth from yawning wide and loudly. The adrenaline from earlier in the night was wearing off and he was crashing hard. "We should probably continue this another day. I'll walk Imogen home. Mira, could you come by my office tomorrow? I'd like you to take a look at what I took from the dragon to make sure it is all safe and figure out what enchantments there might be."

Mira nodded, "*Yes, of course, Less.*" She glanced at Amber who was so deeply asleep she was drooling a little. She smiled. "*I think it's time for Drake to take Amber and I home, too.*"

Imogen stood up and dipped her head to show Rey gratitude for the hospitality. "I hope to extend the same courtesy you've shown me to you some day soon." She nodded in parting to Drake as well, then followed Less out.

Drake too Amber and Mira home, for which they were both grateful, then made a call to the King of Summer to see if he needed to add anything to Teara's report. He didn't, then also retired his home.

On the walk home, Imogen told Less [her story](#).

Less patted the arm she had hooked around his elbow. It was a deep trauma, and the life of an immortal could not be an easy one. "How long had you been living in your cabin before the dragon found you? Since before Mythic City even existed?"

She shook her head. "I think the Spanish had started the town even before my mother and I moved to Boston. Silver and a little gold was found at Iron Mountain centuries ago and they'd settled here because of that. I arrived much later, but I have been -- had been -- living at my cabin for a long time.

"About twenty years ago," she continued, "I stopped making contact with the city and places nearby. It was a bad time then. I needed to lie low while unfriendly sorts roved the area. In recent years, they were displaced by rivals but I wasn't sure I wanted to risk seeing if those rivals were friendly or not."

Less tried to think back 20 years to what was going on then. "Unfriendly sorts? Have you maintained contact with the spirits of the area?"

"Yes," Imogen confirmed. "Truth be told, I'm not all that. Coming back from death is handy, but it's not always the advantage one might think. There are worse things than death. Nor am I personally powerful. I have a very specific skill set. But the thing I do have going for me all relates to my connections with spirits. I have a lot of allies and am very good at finding spirits willing to help or at least deal with me. That's how I intend to find this special group of witches or whatever they are. People like that tend to attract the attention of spirits that feed on certain kinds of emotional energy. I just have to ask the right spirits the right questions. Then, I can move through the Shadow World -- or even between worlds to verify what they tell me."

She smiled, a small trace of pride leaking through. "That's actually a pretty special skill. Not even spirits nor creatures related so spirits can do that. Using the cracks in the world is something I managed to find that no one else has, that I know of. Unfortunately, even that's not foolproof. Like when the dragon put me in a cage. I could see where I needed to be to slip away and escape right not more than a few paces from my cage. I just could ... not.. reach it. The damned thing blocks spirits and any related spirit powers."

"Well, I'm glad I happened into that tunnel. I shudder to think what would have happened if we hadn't come for the dragon." Less briefly wondered if Imogen's spirits had somehow convinced the dragon to kidnap Amber in the hopes a rescue would include Imogen. "It is going to be very interesting talking to you about the history of Mythic City. The arrival of the railway. The arrival of the vampires. I am looking forward to many stories over pots of tea. But you mentioned that 20 years ago there were roving unfriendlies? I don't recall anything of the sort. Were these unfriendly spirits?"

"That, and more. Over the years I had made some friends of a variety of people that were

interested in protecting our world from the dangers of the spirits who cross over into our realm for purposes that I call evil. Of course spirits never look at themselves as good or evil. They simply are. But there are spirits that can cause sickness, violence, madness and death. They feed on this. Because it brings destruction to human beings, I call it evil.

"Anyway there have been beings that guard the ... border for lack of better word. Between this world and the world of spirits. These beings go after any spirit, helpful or harmful, that breaches the barrier and enters our world. They take it upon themselves to be enforcers. They aren't good or evil, either. Not really. Although they have no qualms killing any human being that might get in their way or who might purposefully or accidentally bring spirits over into our world.

"You would call them werewolves. Because I dealt with spirits and had goals similar enough to be tolerable to them, we allied to face threats larger than either of use alone could handle. We eventually became friends. I was quite close to a particular group of them.

"But despite their tendency to live by simple, clear rules, they do still have politics of a sort. They still have war, even among their own kind. A rival group of werewolves came here about twenty years ago. They did not see them as guardians defending this world from the spirit world. They invited spirits. They therefore gained powerful allies. They came here and murdered all of my allies and I went into hiding because these people are capable of not just killing my body, but then also tracking my spirits and tearing it apart. Then I would go to the Underworld, were mortals go when they die. It would be years or centuries before I return, if I could return at all. So after my friend were killed by these, I went into hiding and stayed there for the past two decades. Recently I've noticed some of the worst of the spirits have been withdrawing from the area, but I hadn't yet begun to scout around to see if the killer werewolves had gone yet."

Imogen was quiet a while, giving Less time to absorb what she said. After a couple minutes, she said, "I think that I haven't run across your people before because my worlds are of the spirits and the mortal realm. And your world is of the mortal realm and... someplace very different. Yet, if you like," she added shyly, "I could take you with me? When I go to speak with the spirits? I you wanted to."

Less did recall the werewolf turf war. He hadn't been involved in any way but the Master of Grief at the time had briefed him, and Rey had mentioned it a few times. He hadn't realized werewolves were so active in the spirit world. "I would like to go with you," he said, almost greedily. "My knowledge of occult matters is woefully lacking. We call the boundary between the mortal world and the realm of the Fae the Hedge. It marks the edge of reality. Beyond it is un-reality, like a dream or a nightmare."

Imogen smiled. "That seems like a difficult place to grasp, mentally speaking. I considered myself expert in some matters of the occult, yet I be like a child compared to you in matters you know best. Some unwise people think that all knowledge is good to learn. It's commonly said that knowledge is power. That's true, but sometimes that power can bring

harm to you.

"I will not show you things that be harmful to you in the spirit world. You are wise and know that the spirit world is not a safe place to be, unless you are with me and mindful of what I tell you." She looked up at him with big blue eyes. It was easy to forget she was not an innocent young woman. Looks could be deceiving. "You wouldn't teach me things that would be bad for me to know, either, would you?"

For Less, to whom information was his stock and trade, he found it hard to grasp the idea of knowledge that was bad for you to know. Certainly he wished Aurra had never told him about the magic she could work for him, but it had been his unfamiliarity with what he was dealing with that had caused all the problems. Still, he was familiar with the concept of Pandora's Box. And for him it was usually more worthwhile to keep secrets once he had them than to give them up. "It's normally best to stay out of the Hedge as much as possible. You seemed to cope without any trouble but I understand vampires and werewolves become wild and frenzied there. But I understand your concerns. I will return the favour and try to keep you as safe from danger as possible."

She seemed satisfied with his answer. Then, in response to muffled chirping, she asked, "Is that a phone ringing?"

Rey put away the beer she'd poured for herself, then drove out to the apartment she had picked him up from before. When she got there and knocked on his door. There was no answer. It was early morning, however; it could be that he was asleep.

She pulled out her cell phone and looked to see if there were any bars showing she had a connection to the cell phone network. She appeared to have enough to make a call. She quickly dialed Richard's number, and was surprised to hear it ringing in the apartment. She frowned, but let it ring until it went to voice mail.

Something was wrong. Richard never went anywhere without his cell phone. He even went into the Hedge with it - the usual reason it would go immediately to voice mail. She tried the doorknob and discovered it was unlocked.

Rey felt torn between the desire not to invade Richard's home and privacy, and her concern for him. In the months they'd been together, this was the closest she'd ever been to being in side his apartment. She quickly sent a text message to both Mira and Less, saying she was at Richard's, and afraid something was seriously wrong. That she was going in.

With that, she carefully and quietly opened the door, moving it slowly in case it was chained. Not that that could stop her, if she really wanted in. Unless, of course, there were some non-mundane protections in place.

The door swung freely. The small apartment wasn't much to look at. There was a kitchen immediately to the right and the dining area and living room were combined into one space. The door to Richard's single bedroom stood open and so did the door to his small bathroom.

Richard must have left in a hurry. The lights were still on and there was a chair tipped over. A police scanner chattered on a coffee table in the living area.

A table was shoved up against a wall opposite the kitchen where a cork board had been nailed up. There was a map of Mythic City there, marked with grease pencil and pins with notes. There was a pattern of accidents, disasters and assaults pinned all over the city. Richard had drawn red lines through them in a complicated diagram. The end result looked frighteningly like a summoning circle that used the entire city and a chorus of terror and destruction as methods to power it.

Near the center of it there were a series of dots where Richard had noted times, dates, and event. The events ranged from traffic accidents to assaults, but all seemed to be senseless in its violence. He'd drawn a line through it pointing at a red circle in the middle of downtown Mythic City. He'd written the time -- set for over two hours ago -- and drawn red circles around it and surrounded it with question marks.

A pad was resting on the table with his thoughts and a checklist of To Dos that included collecting his best weapons and armor, a special iron chest, and notifying his motley of the when and where.

"Oh my god, Richard," she breathed. "What have you done?" Did he take Veridia and the others into this danger? Her hands were shaking so bad she had difficulty dialing Veridia's number. "Answer," she murmured. "Dear god, please answer."

The voice she got was not Veridia. "Rey, my motley is a little busy right now. This better be important." It was the queen's assassin, Vicissitude.

"Whatever you do, don't touch the Key!" Normally, the assassin answering Veridia's phone would have disturbed her, but she's had more important things on her mind. "It can control mortals and Changelings alike. The Winter King says Mira is the only one who has a chance to handle it safely. I've got a line on a group who can contain and possibly even neutralize the thing, but we need time."

"Richard briefed us. Forgive me if I find the Winter King's faith in your motley's fang-banging, crazy nymph dubious at best. Veridia and Lydia know what they are doing. Richard and I already took the Key's host down; a paramedic who was apparently present at the mess you made at your sister's place. We're handling it since thanks to your motley's losing it right out from under your nose, that medic went on to murder eight people last night. Just stay out of this one, Rey. Let the professionals handle it."

Then Sissy hung up on her.

Rey stared at her phone and swore. One day Sissy would get what's coming to her. The Witch quickly dialed Less' number.

When Less saw that Rey was calling, he wondered if he had left something behind.
"What's up, Rey?"

"Richard, my Queen and their motley are going after the Key right now." Rey did nothing to hide the concern in her voice.

"What!?" Less practically shouted into the phone. "Without consulting us? I am the king of Winter, I should have been informed. You have done the most research about it. Is this a power play? Where are they?"

"Vicissitude said we should leave it to the professionals," Rey replied, and gave a quick rundown of what she'd seen on the bulletin board. "Sissy said they'd taken down the bearer, and that Veridia and Lidia were going after the Key itself."

"I can't believe that Richard didn't say anything about tracking it when we fought the Bearer! Okay, Veridia should be able to detect the Key with her magic. Hopefully they know what they're doing because, quite frankly, we're exhausted magically and physically. I doubt we'd be much help right now."

"Do what you want," Rey said, her temper getting the best of her. "I'm going."

Less hung up and sighed. He dropped the phone in his pocket and quickened his step. To Imogen he said, "We have to hurry. They Black Key has made another appearance. Once I get you home try to find the priestesses." He made sure she had the keys to his apartment and grabbed his phone again. He called Mira's apartment. He knew Mira was tapped out but maybe Drake could pick him up.

It was Mira that answered. "Hello? Oh Less. Is there something wrong?"

After he explained briefly, she said, "Drake dropped us off and went home. I can catch a cab and meet you downtown, though."

Less was reluctant to agree to Mira being exposed to the Key when she was so weak magically, but he figured that it would be better if they were all together. She did have the strange connection with it, after all. "Okay. Keep an eye out for Rey." He hurried to the bus stop, all the while wishing he'd brought the dragon's treasured moped with him.

After Mira hung up she sighed. She was still hurt from the last battle, but she decided it was more impotent to get out there with her motley. The issue of being completely without magic was dangerous, however. She glanced at Amber. Her friend was still in the dress Remy had her wear, but the poor thing was in ruins now. Amber had collapsed on the

couch and was snoring softly.

Mira smiled to herself. It was handy to have a mortal in the apartment in a way she hadn't used before. She quietly got up out of the black, stuffed leather chair and walked over to Amber. She decided this would be easier if she pretended Amber was someone else. Maybe... like Remy. Her smile turned more predatory.

Amber woke with a start. She'd been in the middle of a pleasant dream where she was just about to be embraced by Remy in a big, soft, warm bed. She felt his lips close on hers, his tongue search out hers. Her body came alive and she held him tight to her, pressing into his soft chest as his hair spilled over her face...

She jumped awake with a start and a yelp, scrambling back away from the one who was straddling her. "Ew! What the hell, Mira!" she wiped at her lips and face feeling embarrassed and a little bit violated.

Mira grinned back at her. "*That will do.*" Then got up and headed toward the door.

"You totally just fed on me didn't you? Mira! Ach! Pfew."

"*Think of it as payment for getting herself kidnapped by a dragon.*"

Amber couldn't think of a come back and just gaped at her friend. Mira shut the door behind her.

The motley, each in their own mode of transportation, converged on the address Rey extracted from Richard's map.

When they arrived, they felt they could be reasonably sure that it was a large parking ramp that was the likely spot. Someone had recently put up caution tape across the entrance and there was a sign indicating it was closed for repairs. The north end had a spiral ramp that descended from the sixth level, with entry points on each level as it wound toward the machine that took tickets and payment. The main entrance was on the west side near the north end. There was no other way in for a vehicle, but there was a pedestrian entrance in the middle of the west side. Stairs not far from that entrance raced up the side, right next to an elevator.

Rey shoved a bunch of quarters into the parking meter for her car, maxing the meter out, and made her way toward the pedestrian entrance. She came to a stop and waited impatiently for the others to arrive. If they weren't there soon, she would go in without them.

Less came huffing around the corner and stopped to look around. He spotted Rey and

waved but looked about in confusion. He had expected death, destruction, and the place to be overgrown with plants. He jogged across the street to Rey. "Is this the place?" he asked.

"It is." Rey looked up at the structure. "Richard or the others must have put that tape across the car entrance, to keep people out. Any evidence of the fight is likely inside, out of plain view."

A cab stopped and let Mira out next to them. She looked up at the building, but was silent. Apart from the normal sounds of the city awakening, the garage was silent. "*Maybe they succeeded.*"

They walked in and noticed trucks parked inside, and a few cars. The trucks had the names of a construction company splashed along the doors, proudly proclaiming who the men and women worked for.

"*Victims for the Black Key,*" Mira murmured. "*It would have targeted a place like this, late at night or early morning before anything was open, where it could cause a slaughter without interference.*"

"Remember what we talked about, Mira," said Less. "Something about you reacts to the Key. Try not to fight it. Let yourself flow with it."

The thought of Mira handling the Key still disturbed Rey, but she didn't have any better suggestions. "Let's go." She headed into the stairwell and started up the stairs.

Less trudged up behind Rey. His head was aching with fatigue and he couldn't believe they were heading into yet another dangerous situation completely unprepared. If the Key had somehow bested Veridia, Lydia, Sissy and Richard, they had only their hope that Mira (or the Ice Princess) could somehow deal with it. They hadn't even managed to get their hands on iron to allow them to hurt it or the Bearer, which made him grip his umbrella even harder. He didn't want to think who the Bearer might be now. He hoped the box Richard had arranged for was around and wished he'd had time to go back for the silver cage.

The group cautiously made their way up the ramp. Each floor was silent until they made it to the fourth floor. There, they saw evidence of both construction and carnage.

The center columns were badly damaged and the concrete around it sagged dangerously. Concrete divides had been damaged as if a car had rammed through it here and there. As the group walked out, they spotted a number of things all at once.

First, a heavy iron box with black velvet lining had been crushed. It lay next to a heavily damaged concrete column so it was a good guess it had been thrown with great force. The box itself was the size of a foot locker -- not small.

Blood had pooled in patches here and there. Some of it stilled dribbled down the lifeless fingers of a man lying face down on the floor. A group of construction workers lay where they had fallen, heavy tools like hammers and nail guns still in their hands. One was split from shoulder to hip. Another had half his head chopped off at the temples. And another had been cut in half through the midsection. Too many insides were on the outside.

Less and Rey noticed that these men appeared to have been cut down in mid-charge. By the contorted looks on their faces, they were in a rage when they died and had picked up whatever tools they had handy to attack whatever it was that had won their ire. Whatever had cut them to pieces like that, however, had halted them in their tracks. No one recognized the men and they weren't changelings. They appeared to have been wearing hardhats, which Less spotted nearby.

An engine roared to life while tires squealed. The way it echoed around made it impossible to tell where it was coming from until the plain white van rounded the far end of the ramp and came barreling toward the gathered motley. It must be heading for the spiral exit ramp beyond them, but right now they were all three in the way -- and so were the bodies.

Less felt sick, dismayed and angry all at the same time. The Key had to be stopped! But where was Richard and his motley? When the van turned towards them, Less angrily took control of the air between him and the van and sucked it all violently into a vortex. He hoped the resulting lack of oxygen would stall the van's engine.

Rey stayed where she was, hoping to get a good look at whoever was in the van before diving out of the way so she wouldn't get run over.

The engine choked and the tires squealed as the van skidded to a halt, just missing Rey and Less. Mira screamed a warning to them both, "*Lookout you guys!*" Her self preservation instinct was surprisingly more on the ball than Rey and Less's; she could only watch in horror as the hurtling mass of metal and glass careened at her friends.

The van continued to skid as the driver desperately cranked the wheel to avoid hitting the two changelings. The top-heavy vehicle teetered onto two wheels, and then, as it swept passed them crashed onto its side and slide thirty feet before coming to a rest.

"Oh hell," Rey said, then ran to the van. It was Sissy driving, and she hoped nobody in the van was hurt.

Less groaned as he saw the Autumn assassin's horrified face shoot by and looked back to where the van came from. Were they chasing something or being chased?

After the tinkling of glass ended, the van was deathly silent for a moment. It had fallen on the driver's side and Rey had to run around it to see in through the driver's window. She saw Sissy slowly picking herself up inside there as if dazed. Her left arm was quite obviously broken and when the shock wore off it was sure to hurt like hell. She was trying

to work her seatbelt with one hand but was having no success. Cuts across her forehead and nose showed where an airbag had bashed her in the face, but at least her face wasn't broken, too.

"Hold on, Vicissitude," Rey said. "We'll get you out of there." While Rey cut Sissy's seat belt, Sissy blinked to clear her head.

"Mira!" called Less. "Do you sense the Key around here?"

Mira came over to Less and shook her head. "*I've got nothing.*"

Meanwhile, Sissy recovered. She clutched her broken arm to her side as she struggled. She was free of the seat belt, but couldn't get up. "Forget it, Rey! Goddamn it." She twisted her head trying to look in the back of van. "If your stubbornness and unwillingness to follow simple instructions has just killed Veridia or Lydia, I will never forgive you!"

Less decided the Key had somehow fled. He could hear the argument starting at the front of the van but he would not be apologising for his actions. He attempted to open the rear doors of the van.

Get in line, Rey thought to herself. She gave Sissy a look over, decided that she was in no immediate danger of dying, and went to the back of the van to help Less.

Less had to heave, but the back doors came free. He had to hold one door up so he could get enough light inside to see. Then, what he did see upset him. Rey joined him in peering inside.

Lydia -- it seemed to be Lydia -- was sprawled face down across the side of the van, but the spidery woman was beginning to move. Less mobile was Veridia. She lay face up, staring at nothing but obviously having difficulty breathing. A piece of rebar was protruding from her chest. The van hadn't landed on anything like that, so the rebar must have speared her some time before the crash, and then she'd been cut free. The ending looked to be recently severed by some very sharp instrument.

"Where's Richard?" Rey asked as she pulled out her cell phone and speed dialed the number she had for Dr. Tom. It went directly to voicemail -- he likely had returned to the motley hollow to find replacements for the goblin fruit used up or to rest.

Lydia shook her head then looked to her sister. Lydia looked stricken and pale when she saw the queen's condition.

"Try Ishtar's hotline," suggested Less. It was tragic that Vicissitude had been driving so recklessly. Veridia needed immediate assistance. "We'll have to transfer her to your car, Rey."

Rey tried not to glare at Less. His stating the obvious was not helping her mood. As she

dialled, she toward the front of the van where Sissy was, but it was partitioned with curtains. Rey waited for the answer to her question.

Lydia drew herself up and put Veridia's head on her lap. "It worked," she murmured to Less. "Veridia's plan worked. Were it not for those idiot construction workers, the threat would be done and gone now."

To Rey's surprise, Ishtar's voice answered. "Yes?"

"Queen Ishtar," Rey said, "we need the assistance of your Court's healers." She told Ishtar where they were, and both Sissy's and Veridia's conditions, stating it was as a result of a conflict with the Bearer and the Key. "We may be able to transport them in my car, but I'm not sure we should move Veridia."

Less struggled to get closer to Lydia, strained himself to hear her words clearly. "What was her plan? Did it involve the iron box we saw? What happened with the construction workers?"

"Veridia knows the ritual of Quietus. Our mother taught it to us before..." She closed her eyes. "It's not something we thought about for years. We didn't even think it was real, thought it just a fairy tale. But she'd recorded it in her diary. We recovered it last night and when Veridia read it, it all came back. Veridia knew what the Key means.

"But the thing is mischievous in the worst, most evil sense you can imagine. We destroyed the Key Bearer and When it sensed that it's mad little trip here was at an end it... did something. It made another illusion, like so many others it used to frighten us away or seduce us or drive us mad. Only this time it was just a little girl. A little girl screaming for help. Those men came. They came with iron and we were defenseless. One of them fired nails at us while one ran to save the "girl". Others struck us with iron tools thinking we were hurting an innocent. Richard tried to stop the man coming for the girl. He knew he couldn't touch the key."

Lydia leaned back and laughed silently, full of anguish. "We were undone not by the Key but by the very mortals we tried to save."

She shook her head, anguish in her eyes. "Maybe the construction worker pushed him onto the Key. Maybe Richard fell. All I know is that the when Richard stood up again, the man was dead and Richard wasn't Richard anymore. He attacked Veridia. The Key couldn't allow one who knew its secret to live. He threw her into unfinished concrete. Richard is... the Key Bearer is unstoppable now and our Queen dies."

Rey fell silent when she heard Lydia's words. Her eyes filled with tears and her heart felt like it would break. She shook her head. "No. That cannot happen." Richard couldn't be gone. Not forever. "No, the priestesses will know. They'll have to know a way." Despair and rage coursed through her, threatening to shatter what little control she now had.

Mira took Rey and hugged her close. *"We'll find Richard and get the Key. We'll put things right again, Rey."*

Less hadn't always gotten on well with the big minotaur but this news was a blow. They guy certainly didn't deserve the fate he had been handed. But he felt more concern for Rey. He touched her arm gently while removing her forgotten cell phone. "Rey, we'll break the link with the Key. You'll see. We'll get Richard back." He let Mira take over attending to Rey's shock and stepped away from the group to finish with the undoubtedly bewildered Ishtar. He filled her in and gave the address of the parking garage. He hoped they had some kind of ambulance service to send immediately.

"An ambulance is exactly what you need," Ishtar was saying from the phone. "Their technicians will stabilize her so that she can be moved without killing her. Do *not* try to move her yourself. I will have my people waiting for her at the closest hospital to your location. I'll also send Max. He can handle any uncomfortable questions. There will be police and they'll ask questions, but you needn't worry about that either. I'll send some Fairest there to handle that."

Fairest were pretty good at posing as people they were not and convincing others to follow their lead. Fairest were a good choice to handle police matters. The way Ishtar was responding to help someone who had been her enemy was remarkable, however. Perhaps she was taking advantage of an opportunity to mend bridges among the regents of the duchy.

Meanwhile, Rey stood motionless, almost unaware of Mira's embrace. The words "we may have to kill him" were playing over and over in her mind. She truly didn't see what other option they might have. Why would the priestesses care about him? Their concern was restraining and controlling the Key. The dangers and problems of facing him, of killing him, possible scenarios and confrontations, raced through her imagination, each one worse than the last. Tears ran unchecked down her cheeks.

"Rey," Mira said, trying to get Rey to shake out of it, *"we'll ask Doctor Tom for sedatives we can give Richard. As long as we are prepared to handle the Key, there is no reason in the world we can't handle Richard properly and save him. But to do this, we need you to get hold of yourself. We need you thinking clearly."*

Rey nodded, then pulled a tissue out of her pocket and wiped her face. "We need that rite, either from Veridia, their mother's journal, or find those priestesses. We'll need a way to protect those performing the rite, and something to confine the Key. We need to figure out how to track it down, or a way to lure it to us. And a way to deal with Richard, to deliver the sedative or otherwise restrain him. I may be able to ask some friends to help with the last part. Restraining him."

"If you think it's wise to involve others," Mira said. She decided to leave that one up to Rey. *"And so long as they can't be tricked by the Key into running off with it."*

Lydia said, "Where is Sissy? She was cross-compiling information with Richard. She may know where the Key will be next in order to complete the Gate Ritual."

"She's still in the cab," Rey said with a slight gesture of her hand. She looked around and hoped to see one of the emergency phones the city had installed on all levels of the various parking structures. She spotted it near the elevator. "I'll use that phone to call 911. That way they can't trace it back to one of us."

"Ishtar says she will have Max and others meet the ambulance at the hospital to sort out all the details," reported Less.

While Rey made the call, Mira helped Sissy out of the van. When she asked Sissy whether she would leave to avoid the police or stay with Lydia and Veridia, she received a scowl and a venomous look, so she let Sissy alone where she sat near a concrete post.

Less didn't feel good about leaving these wounded changelings - especially Queen Veridia - but the ambulance was on its way and Lydia seemed capable of looking after the Queen, her sister. The dead construction workers would bring a lot of difficult questions. These would be fielded by the experienced Spring courtiers waiting at the hospital but it would be better if the Glymjacks didn't have to be woven into the story. He lightly touched Rey's arm to indicate they should go and caught Mira's eye. "Things are in hand here. Let's head home figure out how to protect Richard from the Key."

Mira used Glymjack sign. "I think you are right. We should go. But we will have to contact the Assassin again in order to get those notes. Or maybe visit Richard's place. We need to find out where and when the Key will strike again. And meanwhile we may have to deal with more breaches of Faerie into this world. I think that it's happening now with or without the presence of the Black Key. I think it's anywhere the boundary between the Hedge and this world wears thin."

"Where the boundary to the Hedge wears thin," repeated Less to himself. "So, basically at any place any changeling has created a gate. I'll post a Duchy-wide memo on the subject to warn everyone."

Mira nodded and smiled, pleased he understood what she meant to perfectly.

"Wonderful," Rey muttered. "My house could be ground zero."

Less yawned. The adrenaline from the encounter with Veridia's motley was crashing hard. "We should go straight to Richard's place, then. I'll phone Saya on the way and have her pass on the information about the gates."

Saya was Bearer of the Tearful Cup and therefore held the position for communications for the Wardens. As the sole Spring Courtier in his organization, she was the most ambitious when it came to getting word out. The details of the Wardens, however, was unknown outside their secretive organization.

"Who is Saya?" Mira asked with a playful smile. "A new girlfriend?"

Less stiffened. He really was tired to let that slip. "Hardly. She is handling communications in the ruling Court."

"Can you guys meet me at my place?" Rey asked her motley mates. "There's something I need to do."

"I'd rather not go to your place if there might be an incursion by Faerie at the gate," said Less. "I'd prefer it if we all stayed together right now, considering. Where are you going?"

"It's personal." Rey was in no mood to be explaining herself to someone who she knew kept an untold number of secrets from her and Mira.

Mira frowned with worry. Rey had always tended to isolate herself a little, pushing others in the motley away enough so that she had privacy to have her own life, too. This didn't seem like a good time to be going off alone. Not when she was so upset about Richard, and certainly not when the whole city was in imminent danger of critical weirdness invading the lives of every mortal.

Yet she didn't say a word about it. That would only enrage Rey. Mira just watched Rey with a mixture of worry and fear as she dug in her pocket. She'd used her last bit of cash on cab rides and didn't even have bus fare left. Coming up with only thirty five cents including pennies, she said, "Okay. Well. Can I borrow bus fare?"

"No problem," Rey replied, and pulled some cash out of her pocket. She gave Mira enough money for bus fare for both her and Less, plus some extra, just in case. "I won't be too long."

"We'll be at Richard's place," Less reminded her.

"You know where he lives, then?" Rey asked.

"Of course," he said simply.

Mira read the look on Rey's face. "We'll meet you at Less's apartment," she signed in Glymjack. She gave Rey a quick hug to send her off, then looped her arm through Less's and propelled him toward the stairs.

She whispered, *"I could be wrong about this Less, but I think she's going to Richard's apartment. I think she is trying to preserve his privacy. I know it isn't rational and it isn't safe. But 'rational' isn't the space she's in right now. We have to let her do this and we have to trust her not to risk too much."* She glanced up at him and he could see it in her face. *"I'm worried, too. But I think the next real step is to find those women that know this Quietus rite or whatever it is. Otherwise, we aren't going to be able to stop this mess from*

getting worse."

Less and Mira waved as Rey sped off in her car. As they turned to walk together to the bus stop Less was glad of the time alone with Mira. "Mira, I need to tell you something about what happened in the dragon's lair."

"The lair?" she signed.

"Yes. You know how Rey and Drake have said that something comes over you when you black out in battle? I know what has been happening."

He had her complete attention. "What is it?"

He had a sudden sensation of fear but he had nowhere to run to. "My...Keeper...came to me in a dream. She told me that when you first escaped your own Keeper you nearly died trying to find your way through the Hedge. She saved you by placing a shard of Her icy heart into yours. Your elemental affinity for ice comes from Her and she takes over when you lose consciousness." His face was pale and his voice shook as he spoke.

Mira's eyes grew wide and a dozen denials died before she made them. "Your Keeper came to you? She saved..." Fear paled her face as well and she forgot to move her hands to make the Glymjack signs. "Oh my God, Less! This is... I need to sit down."

She glanced about in a half-panic, found the bench under the bus stop sign and flopped down onto it. She shook her head. "I just can't believe it. How long have you known? Does anyone else know? Oh my God, what's going to happen to us?"

Less knelt on the ground in front of her and took her hands. He had started with this information because it could condemn them as Loyalists and would thus secure her silence. "Nobody needs to know," he begged her. "I wouldn't have told you...except...I made a mistake. Your lost memories about Drake - that was my fault. I shouldn't have done it, I know that now. Drake was getting too close to your heart and I feared what would happen if he bound himself to a piece of The Other. In my attempt to separate him from you I made a deal with the Wyrd. I never intended it to rob you of your memories - not after your ordeal with the vampires. I don't know how you can ever forgive me, but they can't find out! Rey and Drake are asking questions but they can't know the truth!"

She pulled her hands away from his and looked away but that didn't hide how upset she was. "*You should have told me,*" she said in a voice that cracked. "*It should have been my choice to continue with Drake or not, not yours.*"

"I know, but it couldn't be helped! My Keeper took most of who I was, but what she guards most closely is my heart. Part of the shard of ice inside you is the scion of Winter. *Me! My heart!* I was jealous of Drake." His voice fell suddenly to a whisper.

"Desperately so."

She turned her face to him. This time her hurt was replaced by concern. This time she took up his hands. *"She did that to you? That monster! To think all this time you have been unable to feel for anyone but the monster that took your soul."* A troubled crease wrinkled her forehead. *"This whole time I never knew you suffered."*

Less tried to regain control of himself. "I suffer for the Duchy." He stood awkwardly and sat next to her, maintaining hold of her hands. His face felt hot - he was conscious of her eyes on him. "She also told me to stop the Key and close the Gates," he croaked from a dry throat. "I don't know what Her motivations are but Her information has been accurate so far."

"Keepers compete with each other," Mira offered a little distantly. Her mind was still reeling, trying to process what he'd told her. *"Do you think that's why the Key affects me differently? Because there is a piece of... Her in me?"*

"Yes, I do," he replied. "I think accessing that unconscious part of you might be the edge we need to finally deal with the Key."

"What if she makes me just turn the Key over to your Keeper? Can you be sure she doesn't have plans that are far worse than what's going on now?"

"It can't really be much worse than it is now. Right now we have no control over the Key and it is destroying the mortal world. I think it's worth the risk to stop the Key."

Mira thought for a moment, then nodded. *"You're right. One problem at a time and right now, this is our own solution."*

The bus arrived with a screech of air-powered breaks. They boarded while Mira dropped cash in the driver's jar and headed for the back of the bus. The bus was sparsely populated and they were able to take a seat near the back. It was eerily quiet in the bus. One young couple sat quietly staring out a window. A business man wearing a suit and fedora sat with his nose buried in a newspaper. A muscular young hispanic man sat longways across a couple seats and watch them with a dully curious expression.

Less was not calm. A storm raged inside him but it left his mind blank. Even the thoughts that he managed to snatch out of the turbulence, mostly about their next steps towards the Key, felt inappropriate. Finally, when the Hispanic man had bored of them and turned to look ahead, he could stand it no longer. Though he felt like he was stepping off a high, sheer cliff, he swivelled on the plastic seat so he could sign to Mira in Glymjack. "I want to help you deal with these revelations. I feel like I truly live when we are together. I want to be with you. You are my Ice Princess!"

Her eyes widened at his earnestness. "But Less," she signed in return, "that's not what I really am. It's just what the Ice Queen put inside me." A cold, prickly feeling came over her, as if that frozen queen had looked her way. She shivered. "How do you know you aren't just reacting to her presence within me?" Her teeth chattered so she clamped her

jaw tight.

That was probably true but he had worked towards this for so long that he had to see it through. "The Others are formless entities that only become something when they wish it. *You* are a permanent being! *You* can't decide to become something else on a whim. It's *your* heart that is entwined with mine. It's you, Mira. It will always be you."

Mira was speechless. She looked back at him with troubled, curious eyes. She wondered why she felt so cold, but already the feeling was subsiding.

The hispanic man was watching again, now with a small smile. He didn't know what was being said, but he could tell by the earnestness in Less's posture that he was intent on courting the young woman.

Mira hadn't noticed. Finally, she signed, "Well there is only one way to tell for sure." She watched him expectantly.

Less was gobsmacked and could only stare while his brain tried to process the meaning behind her words. "Uh...you will prove you are a permanent being?"

She lifted an eyebrow and looked at him, then shook her head. Sticking to sign, she said, "No you dork. Only one way to find out if what you think you feel is real." She waited again to see if he caught on.

That was actually a complicated subject for Less, considering his heart was in the clutches of his Ice Queen. Of course he had heard the stories of Happily Ever After. "I...have to battle the Red Knight for the..." he ventured, but did not find a favourable expression in Mira's face. "Ah! True Love will awaken the princess with a kiss!"

She rolled her eyes. "I thought I talked too much. You going to kiss me or not? Because I'm not going to sit here and try to guess which mouth to kiss."

In Less' day, the kiss would cap an evening of dinner and a trip to the theatre or cinema. He blushed hotly out of embarrassment and thrill. His hesitation was broken when she leaned slightly toward him. He shifted closer to her and bared the mouth on his forearm to reach out to her. The thought of her cold, slick lips made his other mouths go wild: babbling and sputtering. The one on his neck struggled with lips, teeth and tongue to free itself from beneath his collar. He brought his arm to her mouth, gently wrapping his hand around her head to caress the back of her neck, and kissed her.

The kiss was brief but awkward. While Less was heartfelt, Mira had trouble getting into kissing lips on someone's arm. The hispanic man stared. Mira cleared her throat nervously. "Maybe... we shouldn't do that here," she signed.

Less sat back and faced forward. "Yeah," he said aloud. The princess clearly had not been awakened by the kiss. If only his agents had been able to track down some rumour of the

whereabouts of *Le Violon*. His skills were clearly not up to the task of seduction. He met the staring man's eyes and punished him with *Faces in the Water*. "We should focus on the Key."

Mira took his hand and squeezed it reassuringly. The kiss just seemed to her... awkward and more than a little weird. She decided the setting was probably all wrong. Now she probably embarrassed him and felt guilty for pushing him. She believed he was taken with her, Mira, not some fragment of a True Fae thief of hearts and it was touching. She'd always saw him as something of a father figure. It might take time for her to see him as something else.

Mira was left to her thoughts when Less's phone rang.

Rey sat back in her car and looked at the building where Richard lived. The anger and stress she was feeling at the parking garage had gradually leaked away on the drive, and while she felt drained, she felt better. She and her motley should be able to deal with Richard and the Key, hopefully without any more loss of life.

She thought back to what Mira had said, and Rey wondered if Richard's apartment might be affected by the breaking down of the barriers between this world and the Hedge. Going alone into the Hedge, especially right now, would be a very bad thing.

Did they really have to go inside, she asked herself. I got photographs of everything when I was in there last. But I don't have anything of Richard's. She hesitated, torn between wanting a memento and the need to stick together. Rey puled out her phone and dialed Less' number.

"Yes?" answered Less.

"I have photographs of everything Richard used to figure out where the Key would strike next," Rey said without preamble. "Will that be sufficient?"

"Um, yeah, probably." He sounded a bit preoccupied. "You're the expert. If you think you've got enough to continue the investigation. I'll give Imogen the help to track down that priestess organization. Are the police there or something?"

"Why would the police be here?"

"No reason. Just wondering why you would use photographs instead of the source material."

"Because I took the photographs of everything before I went to the parking structure," Rey replied. "And if anywhere there is an entrance from the Hedge, be it a trod or a Door to a Hollow, the Hedge could be intruding into this world, then going into his apartment may

be dangerous. I don't know if he has a Door in there. I never asked. And Mira's going home will be dangerous too, as there's that gate behind her building."

"Public gates, like at Mira's, will be the worst. If you were just there and you don't see vines crawling out the windows it's probably fine, but you're right not to take the risk. Where do you want to meet?"

Rey glanced back at Richard's apartment and had to bite her lip to keep from swearing. "Hedgevines are covering his building right now. And we shouldn't meet at the bus station either. Meet me at the casino. I'll call you again and let you know which room so you can come straight up."

"Okay, 'till then. Bye." He was clearly in the middle of something.

Rey stared at the phone, then sent a text message to Mira: "When you get to MG, go to casino floor Easy restock on Glam."

She sent a reply: "K, thanks!"

Less and Mira had to change buses to go to the casino, but they did. Since it was morning, it wasn't busy. The changelings spent a little time mingling near humans excited to begin the day gambling and soaked up a little glamour. After that, they spotted each other and got together to see what Rey's copies of Richard's maps.

Rey'd laid them out on the table in the kitchenette of the room she'd commandeered. It was one of the rooms being renovated due to some damage to one of the walls carpet, but the work wasn't going to be done for another two days. The largest of the pictures was of the map Richard had used to figure out where the Key was going to strike next. She'd had it blown up to actual size, so they could better work with it.

Less rubbed his eyes as he perused the map. "What are we looking at here?"

"Richard was mapping out violent events the Key was involved with," Rey said, "and used it to figure out when and where it was going to strike next. I haven't had a chance to look at it and figure out how he did it yet."

"So," Mira said aloud, *"we need to figure out how Richard predicted the attack and then use the same technique to predict the next one. Then we'll know how much time we have to find the group that knows of the Key and figure out a way to get control of it. Is that right?"*

"More or less," Rey said with an exhausted nod. "He had a police scanner, and was listening to it. Likely to get locations and clues."

Less had a head for this sort of investigatory work. He took a look at the times and dates, plus locations. It appeared to be occurring with decreasing frequency. If he extrapolated what Richard did, he came up with a date almost exactly three weeks from now.

A decreasing frequency was an odd pattern for something like this, but it evoked the ominous feel of a countdown. "Three weeks. Three weeks to find the priestesses, shake Richard loose from the Key, and close the Black Gates once and for all. Best lead time we've had yet. Anything in Richard's stuff on the Quietus ritual or what the iron box was supposed to be for?"

"No. Just that there was something special about it." Rey ran a tired hand through her hair. "If he knew the ritual, he didn't record anything on paper."

"Maybe these people that your new friend spoke of might know about it, Less," Mira offered. But she was studying the map. *"You know, it strikes me that this is just stuff the Key is doing. It looks like the Key is going to be doing less and less. But the problem is that it won't need to. With the Hedge bleeding through into our world, we know the Gates has already been open too long. What if the next time the Key causes trouble is the last time? Does that mean the Gates of Arcadia are flung wide and that here a new kingdom of the True Fae will arise?"*

She unsuccessfully tried to stifle a yawn. *"I'm probably not thinking clearly anyway. I need to rest. Rey, can Less and I stay in one of your rooms here at the casino?"*

"Mira's right," Rey said. "We can't wait three weeks. By then it just might be too late. And we all need to rest. We can all crash here. This room is out of service for the next couple of days, so it's no problem if we sleep here tonight. I certainly can't go home." She frowned. "I hope Hamilton is okay."

Less hadn't been suggesting they wait the three weeks before acting. He was looking forward to the time to work busily at turning up the necessary intelligence. "I need to check in with Imogen. I've set her up at my place until she can get a place of her own." Since Less had a cell phone he saved money by not having a land line to his apartment. "I can swing by the hospital on my way back here to check on Veridia and question Sissy about the iron box. It shouldn't take too long and I'll be back in time to enjoy the nice comfy cots set up here."

"There's a proper bed in the bedroom, and both this sofa and that oversized chair have hide-a-beds," Rey said with a slight smile. "The room is out of service because it needs that big hole in the wall over there fixed." She pointed over at the corner of the room hidden from obvious sight from the doorway. In one wall closest to the door could be seen a hole in the wall, like someone had taken someone else's head and tried to shove it into the closet the hard way.

That sounded nice enough to Mira, but there was a more important question she had in

mind. *"Is there a large tub, whirlpool, or hot tub?"*

"Just a normal tub, I'm afraid. This isn't one of the luxury rooms," Rey replied. "There's not a lot of towels, just one for each of us. Don't expect any turndown service either. I did, however, authorize three key card. They'll stop working as of 3 pm tomorrow afternoon, so we have to be out of here by then."

Mira already missed her apartment, but she didn't want to appear ungrateful by saying so. Instead she pulled out her phone and called home. Amber eventually answered and Mira told her the apartment may not be safe anymore. She was to prepare a bag so that at the first sign of any weirdness, she was to get out of there. Mira also instructed her to call Remy the moment the sun went down. He was half out of his mind with worry the previous night and he would be wanting to know she was all right. She didn't mention to Amber that Remy's anxiety wasn't so much for Amber's well-being as for the upset to his plans. It would do no good for Amber to learn certain things.

Less, feeling awkward about his and Mira's status, took the opportunity of her being on the phone to make his escape. He told Rey he would be back as soon as possible and wouldn't take any risks with possible Gates. He smiled and waved goodbye to Mira as he left.

Immediately after leaving the casino he was on the phone to Saya, in charge of communications for the Bleak Seal, and dictated an urgent Duchy-wide memo to be distributed to the Crowns for wide dissemination. It warned of the possibility of any gates to the Hedge being overrun by an incursion of Arcadia. Any and all gates, whether open or closed, should be considered dangerous and avoided. Less knew Rey wouldn't like it but he added that Richard, Paladin of Shadows, Autumn Court, is considered temporarily dangerous and should not be approached. If seen, his location should be immediately reported to the Crowns.

Saya efficiently passed on his memo, promising that word would be out to the Crown immediately and that hopefully all changelings in the Duchy would be aware within a day.

Less returned to his apartment. He had not created any gates in his building, preferring to use his network of Hollow Doors, but he could not know if other changelings had been coming and going in the area. Reality seemed stable, however, so he mounted the stairs to his floor. He explained to Imogen the latest developments: That the Black Key now controlled a powerful changeling and they had about three weeks before the Key would swing wide the Gates of Arcadia once and for all. They needed the priestesses to help them separate the Key from Richard and lock it safely away. He warned her that there would be incursions of the Hedge all over town where changelings had been travelling back and forth from the mortal world. Rey and Mira's houses were not safe so they were all staying at the casino so they could work together on stopping the Key. He made sure she had his cell number and invited her to make herself at home, as best as she was able. With that, he wished her luck in the search for the priestesses and hurried off to the hospital.

Imogen had been comfortably confident that she would soon know the location of at least one of the priestesses, lifting Less's heavy heart at least a little bit.

At the hospital, Less was able to quickly locate Veridia. She was surrounded by changeling care, despite the hospital background. Spring had wisely infiltrated some of the hospitals with changelings and ensorcelled humans so they could cover just this sort of emergency. Veridia was still hooked up to a variety of standard medical gear, and doctors had surgically, very carefully removed the iron rod. Even so, it was impossible to shore up all the bleeding and she lay very close to death. Only changeling magical intervention had prevented it thus far. Doctor Tom had suddenly appeared as well, having heard the news after he left the motley hollow not long before Less arrived at the hospital. He pronounced that Veridia may live, but she would likely be paralyzed. The rebar had shattered her spine.

Lydia wouldn't leave her sister's side and seemed to pay no mind to the one sign that seemed most grave; the Autumn Crown appeared to be fading away from Veridia. No one wanted to speak of it in the room with Veridia, but the worry was etched in everyone's faces. If the crown left Veridia, who would Autumn select to be the new Ashen Queen?

If Less had a heart, he was sure the scene would have broken it. He watched Lydia at Veridia's side and watched sadly as he listened to Tom's diagnosis. He shook the doctor's hand and asked him to get in touch with Rover to discuss prosthetics. Winter would cover the costs to get Veridia up and about the Duchy again, when the time was appropriate.

He approached the bed and softly offered his condolences to Lydia, poor sister who had so recently lost another sibling. He touched the Autumn Queen's arm and said to her, "You are a strong and courageous woman, Veridia. You have my full support and you will live to see the end of the *Eochair Dubh*, so say I."

He left the bedside then and sought out Sissy to get any information he could about the Quietus ritual and the iron box. He told her that according to Richard's notes, the next Key event was in three weeks time, and she would be most welcome to have another crack at it.

The Queen's assassin had apparently already seen healers. Her arm was sore but intact already. Or it could very well be she simply sucked the life out of some hapless nurse and used it to heal herself. She was like that.

But unfortunately, she couldn't give him anything useful. She didn't know what the Queen did and didn't understand the language the Queen used. She suspected it was Irish, though, and was very interested in another go at the Key. "Just tell me how I can help," Sissy told the Winter King. "You can count on me. Especially if you stop jumping out in front of me when I'm in a rush."

"That is very good to know. Working together, we'll put this Black Key down!"

Sissy nodded. "Let's end it, and get Richard back."

After his conversation, he returned to the casino and slipped into the quiet room to get some sleep, too.

Back at the casino, Rey and Mira were left together. Mira seemed restless, despite it being well past time to get some sleep. Mira had noticed Less slipped away while she was on the phone.

"So," Mira signed to Rey, "Remy is going to be relieved to hear that Amber is returned."

Rey nodded. "How badly was he injured?" she signed in return.

"He looked bad to me, but he seemed not concerned by it. Fire can't be good for anybody." She shook her head. "But he was intact. As near as I can tell, so long as a vampire is intact, he'll recover from anything."

Mira smiled. "Remember when we ran into him at the warehouse? Those thugs had riddled him with bullets. He just kept coming, like it was no more than a bit of damage to his suit -- and he had plenty of those. Later, when I was with him in the car going to defuse the briefcase bomb it was like he wasn't hurt at all. Only his body, I guess. Vampires are tough as hell."

"He must have tried hard to keep her from being taken," Rey replied. "Are you okay with him using her to get a child?" She hadn't known who he'd decided to have his child, but knowing the timeline of the Contract, it had to be Amber. She wondered if the girl knew what was going on.

"If he'd have asked me, I wouldn't have said no," Mira revealed. "So how could Amber not want to? He's been getting ready for this for weeks. Besides, I will keep the child safe and raise it. Amber will not be alone in this. I gave him my word I would. "

Rey nodded. "I'd like to help, if you'll allow it."

"Why?" Mira hurried to say, "I mean, I know you don't trust vampires and I know you probably don't trust Remy's motivations for having a child. I have no idea what you asked in exchange for this blessing, either, but I know it had to be a lot. Why would you want anything to do with the child of a vampire wrought by fey magic?"

"To help make sure the child isn't completely warped by his vampire parent," Rey signed. "And I've always wanted a child of my own." She looked away, not wanting to see the sadness she knew was probably reflected in her eyes.

Mira said, *"So you understand why I wouldn't have said no to Remy if he'd asked me. I can't give the child for you to raise in my place; I gave my word. But if something happens to me, I would appreciate it if you were the one to help Amber raise Remy's son."*

"A son," Rey murmured. "I bet Remy is ecstatic." Then she shook her head. "I'm not asking to take the child, just to help. If something does happen, I will help Amber."

"I'll ask Amber and Remy when the time comes if it is okay."

"Alright," Rey replied. "Does Less know about this?"

Mira switched back to sign now that Rey was looking at her again. "I don't think so, though it's hard to tell what he does and does not know. He has so many sources."

"I have no intention of telling him." Rey frowned as she signed back to Mira.

"I think we should do some damage control. We have time to figure something out. Assuming this all works, of course, then Amber won't show for a while. But sooner or later, she will and Less will know something has happened. He knows who she's been dating. We'll need to think of something so that he finds out from us what we want him to know, not a half-truth from someone else."

"I agree. I won't hide that I know the goblin contract that allowed it to happen, but I don't want to be inundated with people wanting my help."

"Did it take a toll on you to be able to make... a dead man fertile?"

"It did," Rey said. "A piece of my soul."

"That's a high price. Will you recover?"

"With a bit of time, yes," Rey replied. "It was a price I was willing to pay."

"What was he willing to pay, if I may ask?"

"Something that, if anyone out side of his coterie found out, he'd be in very big trouble." A wicked, satisfied smile danced on Rey's lips. "Will you promise not to tell anyone?"

She nodded, and then added, "Yes."

"A manuscript about vampires," Rey said. "Not one that tells the truth, but one with actual facts about them. Enough information that I can use it as the foundation for an archive, and to help me gain some specialized knowledge about them."

Mira considered. "Knowledge can be a double-edged sword," she observed, switching back to sign again. "Why that and not something more... material? Or some nice, juicy, open-ended favors?"

"I didn't ask for favors because with how uncertain our lives are right now," Rey said, "plus

I know how he would do his best to manipulate the favor he owes to his advantage. I wanted something concrete, something he wouldn't be able to weasel his way out of." Her evil little grin returned. "Plus, I knew what it would cost him, a being almost as secretive as we are, or perhaps moreso, to give up information about he and his own people."

For better or worse, Mira had always trusted Remy far more than Rey did, but she understood her perspective. If it was any other vampire than Remy and his coterie, then after what she'd been through with Leopold was enough to make her very cautious about interacting with any other vampire. She understood why Rey would default to distrust.

For her own sake, however, Mira didn't want to know too much. She only wanted to know enough to be able to work with Remy and his coterie. Knowing more than that could quickly shift her from the position of ally to that of threat. She knew what happened to threats to vampire kind. They were either very quickly owned and controlled by vampires or destroyed.

"I'm glad he was able to give you something of value," she signed with genuine honesty. "I may be shallow, but I'd have gone for cash. Or maybe another Porsche." She smiled widely.

Rey laughed. "Yeah, I could see that." She turned serious once more. "I know the dangers of having that knowledge," she said, "but it was also a test to see if he was really serious about it. I wasn't about to sacrifice a part of myself for him if having a child wasn't something he valued most in his current existence."

Mira nodded. "It's a smart trade," she signed. "If I was there, I'd have judge it a fair trade for you both."

"Thanks," Rey replied. "What were you and Less doing on the bus that had him so distracted when I called?"

"Kissing."

Rey stared at her. That was not the answer she expected. "Kissing? Why?"

"He did something I didn't expect. He really told me the truth about his feelings and why he behaves the way he does around me. I never recognized the reason that he wanted to be so close to me. He was so honest and put everything on the line. He really stripped his soul bare to me while we were waiting for the bus." Mira shook her head, still feeling like it had been somehow surreal. "He was so vulnerable. He's in love with me."

"In love with you." Rey found it hard to believe. "Behaves how around you? I've never seen him show any signs that he loves you. Do you think someone may be messing with his head?"

Mira shook her head. "I'm sure it's real. I've never seen a more real emotion from him. I didn't know what to say to him. I thought I at least owed it to him to try and see if there were sparks between us, some chemistry. I'd always seen him as kind of a father figure to me. Wise Father Winter, I guess. His loving me was a surprise. So, I asked him to kiss me."

"And?"

Mira made a pained face. "I think I botched it. Did it wrong. I wasn't sure which mouth to kiss, you see, so I just waited for him to kiss me. I couldn't quite get past the strangeness of it. I'm sure I embarrassed him."

Rey shook her head. "You can never do a wrong kiss. Either you like it or you don't. And if it feels wrong, then it probably was. Think about Richard. Not exactly easy to kiss him, and it would turn off most women, but it doesn't matter to me one bit."

"Are you sure? I might be just vain." Mira was thinking she was one of those women that would find Richard's bovine head a turn off.

"Listen," Rey said. "If a guy's kiss creeps you out, or makes you feel uncomfortable, then a romantic relationship isn't likely to happen. If you want to try again, then do so, but if there's no instant zing, no flash of passion, then you're better off sticking to friendship. I know it's a cliché, can we just be friends, but trying to force it, to convince yourself you're feeling the same thing he is, it'll only lead to trouble."

Mira seemed troubled, but she nodded. "I'm sure you're right. It's just I feel bad about it. He was so earnest. I feel like I didn't give it enough of a chance. Or maybe it was just the mouth he used. It came off awkward there."

"I've had my share of earnest kisses," Rey replied, "and don't feel bad if you don't feel the same way he does. Trying to force it will only cause trouble." She shook her head. "I just don't understand why he kept it a secret."

"Maybe he was afraid of the very thing that happened. That his affection wouldn't be returned," Mira sighed. "Well, maybe things will develop for him with that Imogen girl. She seemed nice."

Rey nodded. "She seemed to like him as well."

"And she's really pretty."

After that, the two changelings decided it was time for badly needed rest. Mira went to sleep right where she was on the couch. Rey made use of a bed.

It felt like time must have warped somehow. The motley members had just closed their eyes and when they opened them again, the room was bathed in a gentle orange glow from the setting sun.

"We should be able to get something to eat at one of the restaurants downstairs," Rey said around a yawn. "No room service."

Mira's phone was buzzing. Mira sat up and looked around groggily. She had a serious case of bed-head. *"Hi Remy. She did? That's good. Are you all right-- no you're welcome. Of course. No, no one got hurt. Yes, of course I'm lying, but what good does it do for you to know that? It's dead. Very sure and it needed killing anyway. Can't have things like that flying around swiping all the virgins, you know."* She added with a suggestive note in her voice, *"She could use company right now, I'm sure. You two have fun. It's your night."*

Less sat up and blinked the sleep out of his many eyes. His eyelids felt sticky. Automatically, he checked his watch and pulled out his phone to check for the various scheduled updates he received from his operatives. When he finally turned his attention to the room, he couldn't help but to lift up his phone to snap a photo of Mira. Despite the Hedge-thorn tangle of hair, the stripe of golden sunlight across her face accentuated her beauty.

After closing her phone, Mira yawned, not noticing his stealthy recording. *"Well I can't afford to eat at the restaurant downstairs. I spent all my money on cabs. Since the school isn't far from here, I thought I would check it out. If the Hedge has overgrown it, then there might be hedge fruits to harvest."*

It shocked Less awake to hear it spoken aloud. *Harvesting hedge fruit in the city!* He wondered how long the Mask could hold. "You shouldn't go alone," he said, reaching for his trousers carefully folded over the end of the bed.

"I will grab some sandwiches for all of us," Rey added. "With my employee discount, it won't cost all that much."

Less nodded his thanks as he slipped into his shirt. He brushed futilely at a dragon-fire soot stain. "You guys were asleep by the time I got in. I was at the hospital earlier. Veridia will survive but will probably not walk again. Autumn will need a new queen."

Rey stared at him. "Her crown is fading?" What would they do, Rey thought. Autumn needs a regent. What if It decided there was nobody suitable?

Mira's eyes grew large after Less confirmed Rey's fear. *"Oh no,"* she said.

Rey shook her head. "We can't worry about that now. If the city falls, then the who the new Autumn Court regent will be the least of our worries.

"Just thought you should know," said Less. "Imogen is actively seeking the priestesses.

After we get something to eat we should try to get started on figuring out this Quietus ritual. It's quite likely that the Key knows about the ritual and will be actively trying to prevent us from accessing it."

"We've got nothing to start with," Rey replied, "unless we somehow get a copy of the Fear Sister's mother's journal. She had to have been one of the priestesses, a member of that group."

"We need to find those priestesses. They are the only ones that can do the ritual now, unless you are considering a bargain with one of the True Fae in hopes of being taught a new ritual."

Rey looked at Less, waiting to see what he had to say about that.

"That's just what we need - to add another True Fae into the mix." Though it made him curious as to what the Ice Princess would say. "It wouldn't hurt to approach Lydia about the diary. The request might seem more appropriate from you, Rey. In the meantime, we should each find ourselves a weapon of cold iron for when we do find the Key. And I'll ask Rover if he can build us another iron box."

"Richard's notes said something about a special box," Rey reminded them. "With every ritual I have experience with, the important things must have special qualities. Just any old box won't work. I suspect, though, that the priestesses might have one."

"And I'm not going to ask Lydia for the book. Not right now. I'm not going to do anything that will force her to leave her sister's side. A request from the Winter King would hold more weight anyway. I'm just the Witch of the Bitter Wind." And possibly the reason Veridia is paralyzed, Rey thought harshly. Like I'm the reason my sister is blind.

"An iron box does sound like the right place to start anyway. I wonder if he could manage cold-forged iron? Fey powers don't work against that for whatever reason. Too bad we don't have dimensions to give him. He'll just have to... be creative." She smiled. Rover would have to be at his keenest and most creative to have to build a box that would resist every power he had. She knew he'd love that kind of challenge.

"I'm going to ask Rover to get started anyway," said Less. "I don't want to be without something to contain the Key for want of exact specifications. I saw the remains of Veridia's box at the parkade so I'll use that approximate size. I figure it just has to be big enough to fit the bag and be fitted with a good lock. I'll get him to make some iron tongs as well."

"The bag?" Rey asked. "What bag?"

"The Key seems to look like a bag. It was an over-sized black purse when I saw it at the grocery store, and at Marie's it was a courier satchel."

Rey shook her head. "No, it's not. Don't you remember what Marie said? The Key was *in* a bag. Not that it was a bag."

"Okay. If we can get the bag in then the Key will be sure to fit."

"What bag? We don't have a bag," Rey replied. "We don't know if it is still in a bag."

"Okay, whatever. I'll tell Rover to make the box about yea big, same as what we saw at the parkade. If we find out differently, we can make adjustments."

After Rey returned with sandwiches and Less had called Rover at his shop about building a cold iron box, they took time to eat. Mira thanked Rey for the sandwich, but she still needed goblin fruit -- her health depended on it and her ability to gather glamour also largely depended on it as well.

"So I think I still need to stop either in the Hedge itself or in some place it has burst through. I can use the opportunity to check on the damage. I don't want to cower and avoid it because it might be dangerous."

"After Less and I noticed mortals avoiding those places I've begun to think that the Mask and the boundary is still in place in the minds of mortals unless they are forced to pay attention to it. That can afford me a little cover, as well, should my Mask fall away inside those areas."

"What's on your schedule today, Rey?" asked Less. "I'm going with Mira on her harvesting trip. It would be nice to have you along if you've got the time."

"I'll come with you," Rey replied. "Three sets of eyes looking for danger are better than two."

"Indeed!" Less picked up his hat and umbrella and held the door open for the two ladies.

After finding their way to the abandoned school, the party couldn't help but notice the grounds seemed to be avoided by mortals. Pedestrians would cross the street to walk to avoid it and cars went around overgrown areas. No one seemed to make any special note of the towering weeds in the schoolyard, or the trees that seemed to have burst through parts of the old building.

When asked specifically about the condition of the property, folks remarked that the city had really let the place go, but it was abandoned. No one goes there anymore. They figured the city would tear it all down some day, when the budget allowed, of course. The motley got funny looks, like they crazy, if they pointed out it had only just gotten like that. "Look at the trees," folks would say, "been that way as long as I can remember."

That, Mira muttered as they closed on the property, was exactly how the True Fae would take over one day. One lost memory, one assumption at a time until the Hedge gobbled up

every last bit of the city and there were nothing left but slaves under the sway of Fae Princes.

Hunting was unfortunately fruitful. To the motley's growing alarm, goblin vegetation was already present here. This required the magic of the Hedge to survive, and that meant the things left behind by humanity could pick up the enchantment. How soon before dangerous Tokens might find their way into the hands of mortals? How soon before artifacts promising dreams at the cost of souls would proliferate?

Worse, how soon before the predators of the Hedge come hunting the human population?

So far, they had only explored the schoolyard. The large, old school building, now riddled with growth from the Hedge waited to slake curiosity or slay inquisitive changelings. Mira looked up at it and nibbled her lower lip.

"The school was shut down when disappearances of children were connected to it," said Less. "We figured the Goblin King was responsible. No Gate was ever found to prove that hobs were stealing children but clearly there is an old and well-used door to the Hedge in there somewhere." Less was itching to investigate himself. The failure of the Wardens to find the Gate was a sore point with him and an 'i' he'd like dotted. But with the Key out there somewhere the danger was extreme.

"Suddenly, I feel like being somewhere else," Mira muttered warily.

"You're not the only one," Rey replied in a low voice. "I don't know if being in a Hollow will be any safer, and I suspect my house has now been encroached upon by the Hedge as well."

Mira looked across the schoolyard toward the street. Another couple of people were crossing to the other side to avoid the overgrown property. She switched to sign. "Do you think we should check this? Make sure hedge beasts aren't running amok or have a den in there?"

"I think we have to," Rey said. "If we managed to stop the Key and close all these doors, whatever's on this side of the Hedge might get caught here and cause no end of trouble."

"Or they could simply fade and die," Mira signed. "But meanwhile, who knows the damage they could do."

The trio crept closer, being careful of the now-dangerous growth. They spotted ways in via windows shattered by thick vines the burst out from within the building.

Rey led the search with Mira and Less helping. It turned out that Less's sharp eyes helped far more than Miss Easily Distracted -- bunny?!! -- to the point that they noticed the giant, man-eating plant bending down to bite off Mira's head just as she bent down to pick some dandelions (which turned out to actually be the toe-growths of another enormous, mobile

hedge plant). She was oblivious to both but wandered on unharmed much to Less and Rey's shocked surprise.

There were most certainly hedge beasts here. Rey found the den of something like wolves and the old fear of briar wolves sent shivers up her spine. The den wasn't currently occupied, but that could only mean trouble for people in the area. Whatever it was, Rey felt sure it liked hunting.

The team also found that the deeper they went into the school building itself, the easier it was to lose sight of the outside world altogether. That, they knew, was the real danger here. Even a changeling could get lost in the Hedge if they lost sight of the real world too long. This is what kept them from investigating the basement art classrooms and boiler room.

By the time they were ready to leave the school they knew two things. One was that they were hungry. The other was that so was whatever Hedge beasts had taken up residence in that den. It was likely either hiding somewhere in the neighborhood or hunting somewhere in the neighborhood because it would be a whole lot easier to hunt unsuspecting humans than wary hedge creatures.

"This is bad," Rey murmured, stating the obvious. She patted her pocket, assuring herself the items she'd collected - a few leaves, twigs and some small rocks - were still in her pocket. "What do you want to do now?" she asked her companions. "Go looking for the hunting hedge beasts, or check out my house?"

"I'd rather eat," admitted Less. "Let's go to your house and see if we can use your kitchen. We could look all over the city for possible beasts. I'll pass word to Summer that hunting season is open."

Mira threw her vote in with Less. "I agree," she signed. "We need to have a solid base to work from. We could check both Rey's and then my apartment, too. It's good to have fall back positions should one or the other fall into the Hedge."

"My place it is," Rey said. "If it has been taken over, I'd still like to check it out. Make sure Hamilton's okay, or even if he's still there."

As they walked to Rey's house, Less telephoned the Summer King to let him know of the threat of Hedge Beasts in areas of Hedge incursion. Less was sure the Summer courtiers would relish the thought of forming hunting parties without having to actually enter the Hedge.

When they arrived at Rey's they didn't notice anything obviously out of place, at least outside the house. However, when they checked the place out inside, they discovered the Door to the motley Hollow was "stuck" open. The guest room door now led directly to the path immediately outside the Hollow.

"Well that's not good," Mira grumbled. "Um. Party at my place?"

Rey sighed. "Let's grab what food we can carry. No point in leaving it here."

"Hopefully your wards will hold against the Hedge," said Less as he gathered perishables from the fridge into a large plastic bin he found under the counter.

"They should," Rey replied. She grabbed the half-full growler of beer and the bottles of wine from the fridge, and half a dozen storage bags of food from the freezer. "This should help for a couple of days." She hesitated for a moment, then put several pouches of tuna on the counter, along with a canister of cat treats; Rey wanted to make things a bit easier for Hamilton.

The elusive cat sat up and yawned. Hamilton looked down from atop the fridge. "What's all this ruckus about then?"

She quickly explained to him what was happening with the Key, and the intrusion of the Hedge into the city. "That would explain the mice begging for mercy before I ate them," he said. "By the way, you should probably not eat the Raisin Bran." He stretched and extended claws comfortably. "Must I go to the slut's place, too? I could look after the place here."

Mira looked like she wanted to strangle the pompous beast.

"No," Rey replied. "You can stay here or nearby. Just be careful, okay?" She reached down and scratched him between the ears.

He purred audibly.

The motley left and headed outside. "This is all better news than we feared," Mira signed, "and Hamilton appears to be unchanged."

"He's a hedge beast, so I wouldn't expect there to have much of a change," Rey replied. "And he's still angry at you for insulting him."

"No kidding," Mira signed with a roll of her eyes. She'd apologized for that, but she suspected the cat simply enjoyed pushing her buttons.

After they arrived in Santa Fe, they checked Mira's apartment first, but it seemed okay. The large Gate in the Hedge that was not far away, hidden in an alley, was yet to be checked but the residents of the apartment seemed to go about life as usual here. Once inside the apartment, they checked everything they could think of. Once satisfied, Mira offered her friends use of the showers and she began running a tub.

Rey offered to let Less use the shower first.

Less paused in his stocking of Mira's fridge with Rey's food and stood up to talk to her over the door. "No, you can go first. I can wait. I normally have fairly cold showers so don't worry about using up the water."

"I think Mira's tub would do more damage than I would to the hot water," Rey said with a slight smile. She grabbed her toiletries bag and the backpack she'd shoved some clothes into and went into the bathroom.

Mira hopped on top of a kitchen counter and began handing stuff to Less.

Less was dying to know what Mira was feeling with regards to their failed kiss on the bus. When he stood to receive a cucumber and a head of lettuce he paused. He nearly chickened out but pressed on. "So...do you want to try kissing again? I'll try to be less gross."

Mira smiled. "*Less gross. Is that a pun?*" She saw he was being serious, though and moved on. She chose to speak aloud because there was meaning in inflection she needed to express. "She hesitated, then said, *"It's not really the kiss I'm having some trouble with. It's that, well, I guess I've kind of looked to you as a father figure. I abandoned mine a long time ago and now, when I don't know what to do or am feeling lonely or vulnerable, I always know I can come to you. In that sense, I don't think I feel what you do."*

A troubled line formed upon her forehead as she continued. "*But... at the same time, it feels like there is some part of me that is drawn to you in a way I can't describe and don't understand. Some part I don't control. It's so very strange. It feels so... cold."*

Less nodded sadly. "I expected this. Certainly, I first felt my relationship to you was as a friend and advice-giver. I have always been there for you and I always will. But my feelings have changed. Can't you investigate that part of you that is attracted to me? You are an elemental of ice and water! Why should the cold bother you?"

"*It's not a physical cold,*" she said, staring at the floor. "*It's not really emotionally, cold, either. It's more like... an alien sort of cold. Like when the Black Key is near me. My body reacts like it was sex, but it's... wrong."* She frowned at the realization. It was this cold, alien feeling that she'd been encouraged to allow so that the Key wouldn't affect her or harm her.

She looked back up. "*Could this be the ice princess you spoke of? Is it her?*"

Less retreated and put the vegetables he was holding into the fridge and shut the door. "I suppose it could be. My Keeper's icicle pierces your heart. Pay attention to that feeling of cold because when we next face The Black Key, that will be how you can access the 'ice princess' to defeat it."

"*I'm really worried about that. What if I can't do it? What if I panic?*" She did have an idea, though. "*Can you just hypnotize me or something and then call out whatever is inside*

me?"

Less was about to tell her that he knew nothing of hypnotism but he stopped himself. He did have access to her subconscious in a more material way. "It's possible. It would be easiest to do it while you're sleeping, when your conscious mind will not resist. But aren't you tired of people having control over your mind? After what I did with your memories of Drake. After Xavier..."

Mira made a face at the memory. "*Yeah, I am. I guess I was just looking for an easy way out. I don't want to screw this up and cost us the world.*"

"That's fair. As long as you've thought about it. Go up and have a nice relaxing bath and I'll be up after you have gone to sleep. I'll try to see if I can set up some sort of trigger to call forth whatever it is inside you when we need it for The Key."

Mira nodded and told him she would once the tub finished filling.

About twenty minutes later, Rey emerged with still-damp hair, wearing a tight-fitting sports bra and bicycle shorts. It didn't take more than a quick glimpse to notice she had no panty lines. "Oh, that feels so much better." She smiled at Less. "The shower's all yours."

Mira looked at Rey and grinned. "*Oh! The tub should be full now. I'm going to go jump in. Tell me if Amber calls?*" The nymph ran up the spiral stairs to the second level.

Most of Less' eyes followed Mira's departure with longing. When he heard her splash into the tub he trudged off to the shower. It would definitely be a cold one.

"What's up with you and Mira?" Rey said before Less had gone two steps.

He stopped but didn't turn around just yet. "I don't really know," he said honestly.

"So, what, you suddenly decide you want to jump her bones or something, and you don't know why?" Rey's voice was a hair's breadth from being harsh.

He did turn around then. "No, I realized that, along with the rest of the greater Mythic City area, I am in love with Mira. But there is a lot of competition for her heart." *Perhaps you can relate?* He would have added the cutting remark if Richard's life wasn't currently in the gravest of danger.

"Other than Drake, who is there?" Rey asked.

"Vampires, werewolves and the army of torch-bearers who carry a flame for her of which I am one. It doesn't matter. Though there is attraction there she doesn't return my feelings."

He must have it bad, Rey thought to herself, if he believes there was an army's worth of people in love with Mira. "Do you think it might have been one of her many admirers

who messed with her memories of Drake?"

"I don't know. Possibly. Whoever she was with before she called us to help rescue Amber might know more."

"Why do you say that? When we don't know when she lost those memories."

"Just an educated guess. Drake was staying at her place the week before but had forgotten him a day or two later at Iron Mountain. Any number of things could have happened but she was mysterious about who she was with that night."

"I'm surprised you don't know," Rey said.

"It nettles me, certainly, but what with the dragon, the Key, Veridia in the hospital, and the Hedge encroaching into the city I haven't had the time to bring in my eyes on the street to see if anyone knows anything."

"Fair enough," Rey said with a nod. "But when we find out who did it, they're going to pay. Nobody messes with my friends like that and gets away with it."

Less turned and headed to the shower.

As he walked away, Rey thought about her conversation with Less. She sensed he was in turmoil about something, and that it wasn't something he wanted to discuss. She frowned, and grabbed herself an apple to munch on while she waited for Mira and Less to return to the living room.

Less winced as the cold water hit his body but it was only unpleasant for a few seconds. He scrubbed himself quickly and briskly. He felt vulnerable in the bath - it was the one of the rare times when most of his eyes were closed, shut tight against the sting of soap. His mouths hummed and bubbled away. After the short shower, he re-dressed and quietly stole up the spiral staircase to Mira's rooms. He wanted to catch her in a state of pre-dream to access the Ice Princess.

He quietly stole past Amber's closed door (Rey likely had taken her bed, Less could have the couch if he wanted, and Mira would be up in her own room), and tiptoed up the stairs. As his topmost set of eyes reached the level of the second floor, he spied Mira just now getting out of the tub. She was facing away from him and the view was perfect to enjoy her every curve as she ran a towel over her body.

She turned to put one foot up on the edge of the tub while she dried off, exposing one thing that marred her beauty. She still bore a horrible injury from the dragon's attack that nearly ended her life. When she'd fallen, it had been as the ice princess. Her flesh now bore what looked like blackened cracks around a ragged mark in her middle where she'd been impaled upon a stalagmite. It was healing and was much better that he'd seen it only one long day and night ago. She was a changeling with an amazing affinity to fae foods --

other changelings and mortals might have taken weeks or months to heal this much after such an injury.

Still, from her movements, it was clear she was still stiff and sore. She still hadn't noticed Less when she finished drying off and squeezing extra water from her hair. She wrapped the towel around her middle and headed toward her room.

He followed quietly behind, the Mantle of Winter masking his presence from her. He waited in a shadowy corner as she closed the door, let her towel slump into a pile at her feet, and slipped into bed. As she settled into rest, eyes closed, he ventured to her bedside. The Ice Princess was inside her. *She was drawn to him! Mira had said she could feel it!*

They were all exhausted so it wasn't long before Less sensed she had slipped into unconsciousness. He reached out a hand and slowly lowered it to her forehead, not touching, but pretended to caress her pale skin and hair. Then he made the electric connection with her temple.

Her dreams were of the open water. From the salty scent, it was the sea. He watched Mira's dream-self dive deep into cool water that grew colder the deeper she went. She didn't seem to mind.

The blue-tinted world around her faded to darkness in some places far below. Her ability to move in the water was as astonishing in the dream as he knew it to be in reality. She swam as fast as any creature of the sea; faster even than most sea mammals. She dove into the lighter places, discovering thick kelp forests and deceptively sharp corals. She seemed at peace. Eventually, she stretched out and allowed the current of the deep to pull her along through the magical, watery abyss along with fast flocks of journeying jellyfish trailing their deadly tentacles. But this was her dream; they never touched her.

He could see she bore the same injury here as she did in reality. The wound was deep, having lodged in both her body and mind.

She seemed to drift off to sleep in this perfect dream of hers. The kelp forests and coral fell away. The water grew more and more chilly, deep and black. The current dragged her along with increasing speed. Soon, Less could observe how the open ocean above him became clogged with great hunks of floating ice.

Mira floated blissfully unaware to the surface. Less's unseen point of view went with her. Suddenly, something grabbed him by the collar and lifted him from the sea. The next thing he knew, he was standing on a slab of broken ice looking into the cold face of the Ice Princess.

"I've been waiting for you," she said. Her tone wasn't accusing, but it seemed as if expected something.

"And I count the minutes between our meetings," he said. "The dragon is dead but The Black Key now possesses Richard, a powerful changeling and a friend. Mira cannot trust herself to give herself over to you when the crucial time comes to fight The Key. She wants me to set up a trigger that will call you forth even while she is awake."

"I was wondering when you would finally ask. It is possible to summon me. Mira herself can do so, but only when she is desperate enough she would lower her defenses and accept my whispered offer of aid. Only if she accepts my offer can I come out to play for a time. The nymph is in deep denial most of the time, though. She only accepts my offers subconsciously. Other times she is like a child who covers her ears and makes noises so she doesn't have to listen."

"I can't say I blame her. She has had bad experiences with people messing with her mind and memories. It is a difficult thing to give up control to anyone. Can I call you forth if I plant a subliminal suggestion in Mira's dreams?"

"Possibly. You might be able to do something to her that will cause her to lower her defenses and accept my help. She will fight that. She is deeply scarred by what the vampire did, leaving a nightmare I dare not go."

Less knew that dreams could be a dangerous place. It was possible, should the dreamer become lucid, that even a mortal could kill a god in a dream.

But he knew Mira and he knew that deep down she truly trusted him. Even if she were to become consciously aware of him, he had no reason to believe she would turn against him.

But a nightmare left by a vampire? One that was a particularly brutal master of mind domination? That was a place far too dangerous to go. Nor was this the time to address it.

"I need not, however, be restricted to arriving only because Mira allows it. To come into your world, I only need two, so very simple things." In his eyes, the Ice Princess was a vision of the Ice Queen redone in Mira's likeness. She looked at Less and smiled. It was like the stark beauty and cold of deepest winter come to life.

That smile. It triggered lost memories for him and he was suddenly in a flurry of images like snowflakes in a windstorm. The things he had done for that smile. On swan-back, cutting down a fleeing creature. A drop of blood sliding down a mirror. Frozen eyeless corpses, stacked neatly. A white feather bed. Holding open a door for an unsuspecting man. Had she smiled at him as she ripped out his heart? It didn't matter. The images were gone, forced out by the deep, penetrating cold flooding to his core. But after, when all sensation was numb with cold, came the burn. The bright, hot pain. After being denied of all sensation, he revelled in the fire that shot up his icy nerves. It was the pure pleasure of a fine orgasm.

"You mentioned two things," he gasped.

She moved only her lips, her eyes staring into him without blinking. "I would need something of you, something I can use to find my way. And you would need to know one of my names. I will always hear when my name is spoken. With something of you, I can find my way even from the deepest corner of the nymph's mind."

"I see," said Less. The pleasure-pain was blurring the edges of his vision, making his view of her beautiful ice-blue eyes shimmer. He thought about this offer. He did not really want the Ice Queen to enter the mortal realm. It was his sworn duty to prevent such a thing. Besides, she already had something of his: his heart. And though his memories of his Keeper were tenuous at best, he was sure he had called her by name during a dream or vision. He had tried not to hang on to such details given the urgency that changeling society put on avoiding speaking their Keeper's names. He would press for information. "I will remember that. But why don't you just come through The Black Gates while they are still open?"

"I am not the Ice Queen," she said. "She can come here when she pleases. I am a part of her, a shard left within Mira's heart. In this way, I am the daughter of the Ice Queen. Her goals and mine are one. I told you of this shard when I battled the dragon for you, though I had no time to explain.

"I will explain now. My meaning, told in few words because I had no time, was that if Mira should fall, you should take the spike of ice -- me -- from her heart and put me in another changeling. Wait too long, and I will melt away, a casualty of your mortal reality. But for a time I will survive without a host.

"Similarly, should you call upon me, I can come forth -- for a time. Several hours in fact." She drifted close to him, the cold radiating from her body like death. She put arms of finely carved ice around his neck. "I know you desire me. We could be together whenever you wished." Her lips were so close to his cheek they nearly brushed his flesh. Her frozen breath stirred against his ear. Her hard nipples brushed against his chest. "Here, and when I am called forth, I am neither changeling, nor Fae. I am immortal, yet my life can end. Because of this, I can hold the Black Key and never will I be touched by its influence. You need me, my prince. Make me yours. Unleash me. All I ask is what you can spare."

"You already have my heart," he breathed. "What more could you possibly need?"

"No, Winter King. The Ice Queen has your heart. I have nothing, not even Mira. I must have a connection to you. Give me something of you so that I may come to you when you call. I cannot find my way free without something to follow. Surely you have something to spare?" She kissed his cheek, leaving a little patch of frost upon his skin, then kissed his chin and his neck. Her touch was ice, thrilling and terrifying. "I would be grateful if you let me be free sometimes. My time would be short; nothing can ever change that. But in those times, we could be together."

His world tilted but without the feeling of vertigo. Suddenly there was an impact but his

numb body registered no pressure or pain. A cloud of the softest snow billowed out around them, then blanketed them as they lay in the snow. "The Ice Queen abandoned you, didn't she? She made you suffer. Do you wish revenge? Or do you wish to show compassion instead?"

"I want her to acknowledge me! To explain herself." Forgetting himself, he reached around her to caress her back. Instead of a smooth, slick surface he found a biting cold. His fingers froze to her icy skin like a tongue to a metal pole. "You know I cannot call your name without my Keeper hearing. This I cannot do. Better to weaken Mira's resolve to resist you. But I would consider offering you a part of me if you could restore Mira's memories of Drake. Can you find them?"

She sat up, straddling Less and holding herself up off the ground with her hands. "I am sorry Winter King. I have no power over the Ice Queen, nor do I have a name for her I could give you. You needn't fear her coming by uttering any name I give you." She leaned down and kissed one of the mouths on his chest, playfully pulling at the lip. "As for Mira's memories of Drake, there are no such memories to restore. It is as if she gave them away in exchange for something."

Frosted hair fell from her shoulders and brushed his chest. For the first time, the Ice Princes felt like she was losing control of the meeting. A troubled line formed upon her crystalline brow. "You can try to weaken Mira's resolve against me. Perhaps that will work. But what if it doesn't?"

"I can give you many things, Winter King. Please don't doubt what I offer is real. If you would not desire me, I can teach you important things. I was a part of Her. You could sate your lust for her or take your revenge upon her through me as her proxy. Summon me and then banish me to torment a dozen times, a hundred times if it will slake your thirst! Just do not leave me to the dark as the vampire did."

Less pulled his senseless fingers free of her skin, leaving her surface marred with his bloody fingerprints. He caressed her hair, which showered him in crystals of frost. Her kiss awakened his tingling nerves, he saw fireworks behind his eyelids. He wrapped his arms around her again, this time so that he could continue to kiss her wherever his mouths could reach. "If you were truly a part of the Ice Queen then you must share her name," he murmured from whatever mouth was then free of her skin. "I shall give you a name by which I will call you. I name you Niveanne. Pay attention to it and you will find your way out of the darkness. Mira has told me she can feel you reaching for me. You do not need a part of me, not yet."

The Ice Princess turned her head to the side. "You give me... a name. Your name for me," she said slowly. "Niveanne. Yes. I can use this," she agreed. She smiled. His creativity had given her something new, something the Ice Queen didn't know. It had possibilities, where she had none before. "Yes! This will be your name for me, my real name." She looked down at him, pleased.

"Stay with me a while," she said, moving her body against him. "We are deep beneath her dreams. It's only you and I in this place."

Less groaned in frustration. Every inch of him wanted to dally with this daughter of his Ice Queen, but duty called. "I will be with you soon, Niveanne, I promise. But tonight I must prepare Mira to give up control to you when I call for it." He sat up with her in his lap and stroked and kissed her again but forced himself to pull away.

"It might be easy now," Niveanne said. She slithered off him finally, so that he could leave. "Since I can find my way when you call, it will be much easier for me. If you simply convince her to consciously allow it to happen, I'll have traction enough to overcome any subconscious resistance on her part."

"Oh, well, in that case..." Less leaned back toward the icy woman but the dreamscape suddenly changed. A shock wave rippled through the ocean. The frozen surface cracked and threw him down. Mira was waking up.

Something wet and warm plopped onto Rey's face, just as she was slipping into a deep, comfortable sleep in Amber's bed.

"Eww..." she groaned, and wiped at it with a hand as she sat up. It was more difficult than expected, because the motion disturbed a stealthy, four-pawed creature. It vaulted off her and stamped around in her lap as if he owned it. The... wet and warm thing tumbled down her front into her lap as well.

"What the-" Rey opened her eyes and frowned.

Hamilton slapped a paw on the lump of meat to keep it from moving. He sniffed it. Rey had to turn on a lamp to get a good look, but when she did, she wished she hadn't. What she was half of a fat mouse that included its head to its little rodent waist. It was wearing a tiny topcoat. An even tinier monocle hung limply from a chain attached to the coat and a miniature top hat lay not far from its body. There was a little trail of blood and... other fluids that now ran down from under Rey's chin to her lap.

"For you, madam," Hamilton said proudly and with a little feline bow.

"Hamilton, this is so gross!" Rey grimaced and fought the urge to pick the thing up and throw it across the room. "Where the heck did you even find it?"

"Your cupboard. There is a whole clan of them. I think they have declared war on me. Turns out, the little buggers have developed guns. Utterly ineffectual, of course, since they are powered by rubber bands and baking soda. The soup can battle tank was a little

annoying, though, so I caught the mayor and told them they had six hours to surrender or I would eat him. Unfortunately for the mayor, I got hungry. But I saved the best parts for you, of course!"

"Thank you," Rey said as she always did. "I'm not very hungry right now, so why don't you finish it off while I wash up. What else has decided to take up residence in the house?"

He looked at her quizzically at the idea she would need to go somewhere to wash up. "I'm completely stuffed. The mayor here was rather plump."

He pranced about on the bed looking for the perfect soft and warm place to lie down. "I say," he said idly, "there certainly have been changes around this apartment."

"Such as?" Rey picked up the remains of the mouse mayor with two fingers and a wrinkled nose and looked around for a place to put it. She decided on the garbage pail, which luckily was lined with a plastic bag.

"This place is hard to find unless you know exactly what you are looking for. Not only that, but nearly all my powers, and surely all of your powers, no offense Mistress, are suppressed."

"Mira had powerful wards placed on the apartment," Rey replied. "She was tired of enemies tracking her down to her home and attacking her here." She felt a little pang of disappointment. "I suppose she hasn't gotten around to allowing me inside the wards so they don't affect me. I'm not here all that often."

"Why are you here in Miss Amber's bed?" he asked. "Did you do something to the mortal?"

"Oh no," Rey said, shaking her head. "Amber is somewhere else tonight. I'm sleeping here, Mira's upstairs and Less is sleeping on the couch."

"That's good," Hamilton said. "Such an innocent girl. Not innocent-innocent but not corrupted by supernatural influence or scarred by it. I rather like her."

"So do I." Rey slid out of bed. "I'll be back in a second. I want to wash the mouse guts off my face."

Hamilton wasn't there when she returned, though disgustingly, the dead mouse still was. She was about to go look for him when he wandered through the door and hopped back up on the bed.

"Where'd you go off to?" she asked, and she moved the small trash can so she wouldn't be able to see its grizzly contents when she was sitting on the bed.

"You said Less was on the couch, but I didn't see him when I came in through the window," he said.

"He's not in the bathroom. I wonder where he is."

"A man is in Mira's apartment and he's not on the couch or in the bathroom?" He eyed Rey as if she were slow. "Need I remind you of Mira's libido and general lack of common sense?"

"But she's not attracted to him that way," Rey replied. "He's like a father to her, and when he did kiss her before she said it was gross. That it felt wrong." She paused for a moment. "I hope he's not taking advantage of her."

"Forgive me for saying so, but I'm not sure that makes any sense, Mistress. You three have entered in a pledge of alliance. He could not possibly be up there violating her with some sort of malicious intent or he would be in violation of the promise you made to each other. If he's doing something with her, it's either to help her in some way or doing something with her full consent."

"She'd do just about anything for a friend," Rey said, "especially if it was couched in a way that made it sound very reasonable. I spoke to him earlier, and he was upset about something, but it wasn't about to talk about it. He also told me he is in love with Mira, as is supposedly the rest of the world. If he didn't think it was malicious, then it wouldn't violate the oath. People in love can justify almost anything to themselves." She let out a sharp sigh and glanced up in the direction of Mira's bedroom. "I wish I knew what he was doing."

"It's probably none of our business," said the cat. "Also, the door was closed when I went to peek."

Rey snorted. "Like that's ever stopped you before."

"I remind you of my lack of thumbs, Mistress," Hamilton said. "I only got in the apartment because the floozy left the window near the fire escape open."

"Then how, exactly, are you managing to open the locked cupboards in the kitchen?" Rey asked, an eyebrow raised.

"It's magic," he said.

Rey just shook her head. "Let's go take a peek upstairs. I want to see what's going on."

He hopped into her arms and they left Amber's room and crossed the entertainment room to the spiral stairs. Quietly making their way up, they went to Mira's bedroom door. The door was very cold to the touch and there was frost on the handle.

"This is not good." Rey set Hamilton down and used the hem of her shirt to protect her hand from the cold of the doorknob. It was stuck fast. Worse, the cold immediately seared

her hand. Someone didn't want company.

"Sorry, Mira," she said. "I'll pay to fix this." Rey took a few steps back, then threw herself, shoulder first, into the door with all her strength, intending to break the thing down. She wanted to catch whoever was in there, potentially harming Mira, red-handed. She was angry, incredibly angry, that someone would dare hurt Mira in Mira's own home.

Her first blow broke the latch but ice still jammed the door in its frame.

Less came awake at the sound. Mira rolled over in her bed, not quite yet awake herself. Less had slid to the floor next to her bed. His fingers were sore and places that Niveanne had touched him tingled as the numbness wore off, but he hadn't been hurt as much as he seemed to be in Niveanne's dream-realm.

Less found it hard to move: he was frozen to the core and his joints didn't want to flex. His hands ached painfully as if they were thawing out. Frost rimed his hair and clothes and clung to his eyebrows. He forced himself to stand to face the threat. *Had a Key-possessed Richard managed to breach the wards?*

The door was struck again as Rey threw her weight against it. It didn't do much more than make a thump. Mira sat up and rubbed her eyes.

When Rey hit it a third time, the door flew upon with a bang. Mira sat in her bed staring at Rey, surprised and confused. Then thought of the last time someone woke her up like that entered her mind. "*Oh hell no! Bugs again?*" She looked around wildly and noticed Less was there, too.

Less stood at Mira's bedside holding his damaged hands so that they wouldn't touch anything. He couldn't imagine why Rey had just broken down Mira's door but was extremely embarrassed to be found in Mira's room. He searched his mind for an explanation that didn't involve a part of his Keeper inhabiting Mira.

"Less? What the fuck is going on in here?" Seeing Less standing there, looking guilty as hell, made her even angrier. Her thorns grew larger, taking on vicious barbed tips.

Mira looked back and forth between them. She had no idea why Less seemed to be suffering frostbite and less idea why Rey was upset. The only thing that came to her was the fact they had all pledged to be allies as part of the motley pledge. Therefore, since she didn't sense anyone had broken the pledge, they must both have come into her room due to genuine concern.

She kind of wished she didn't sleep in the buff right now, though. "*Are we under attack?*" Mira asked both of them.

"I'm not," Rey spat out, "but pretty sure you were. What the hell were you doing, Less? Why did you seal the room up tight with ice so nobody could get in? Is that what you're

worried about? That I'd catch on you were messing with Mira to get her to love you?"

"What? No!" cried Less. "Mira has nightmares about vampires. She asked me to help her with hypnosis. It works best while she's asleep." That was mostly true.

"Bullshit!" Rey took a step closer, her brambles shifting and lashing out. "You're the one who thinks everything with a dick out there, from werewolves to vampires, want her. Don't fucking lie anymore, or so help me I will gut you were you stand, motley oath be damned."

"*Stop Rey,*" Mira said quietly. *"I did ask for help. Not with... uh werewolves and vampires, but because I'm not sure if I can do what must be done to get control of the Key. Less has always been a gentleman toward me and a friend. He would never bring harm to me."* She flatly refused to believe Less would do any wrong toward her, though Rey's remark about being wanted by so many people confused her. As far as she knew, no one really did, save for Drake. She had to throw herself even at Remy to get his attention and the others certainly didn't have sex in mind. The uses they had in mind were more about killing her or using her to hurt others.

"See!" Rey jabbed a finger at Less. "He's already messed with your mind. He's trying to drive you and Drake apart. He told me to ask Drake about why you'd lost your memories, because he was spending a lot of time with you before it happened. What else might he have done to you under the guise of helping you. If he didn't think it was harm, deluding himself that you'd be better off with him than with anyone else, the oath wouldn't so much as twitch. You know as well as I do what can be done to people in their dreams, things so subtle the dreamer would never suspect a thing."

"*Stop it! Both of you,*" Mira said anxiously. *"We have to keep it together. The most powerful dragon yet is out there and he's seeking revenge on us. Richard is in serious trouble. And if we can't find the Black Key before the final act, everything we know is going to be destroyed and we'll **all** end as slaves to the Others as they carve up our world between themselves."*

"*Rey I don't know why the door was frozen, but it clearly wasn't Less. Look at his fingers, his hair. He's suffering frostbite! He's not controlling ice. That has to be me. I control water and ice. I was asleep and I must have done something. But I swear I didn't purposely try to lock you out."*

"That's right. You don't want *my* help. You never ask for my help anymore, not unless it's something really big, that you and Less can't do yourselves!" Rey turned to Mira. "What did I do to push you away? Obviously Less is more important to you than I am, that you trust him more. I'm sure you've allowed *him* to use his powers in the apartment, while keeping me locked out. But you know what? Why don't I take off for a while, give you two a chance to get your stories straight. Nobody but Hamilton seems to fucking care about me." She turned and stormed out the door, narrowly avoiding kicking Hamilton as she headed for the stairs.

Mira stared after her. *"I guess she doesn't want to hear my answers to her questions. Less, you know I trust you but, I am wondering what you are doing in my bedroom right now. We talked about hypnotism but not right now and not when I didn't know it was coming. I also would like to know why you are hurt."*

"Mira," Less whispered urgently. "I told you earlier that after you had a bath and gone to sleep I would attempt to hypnotically program you with a way to bring out the piece of the Other inside you. It succeeded but it seems that its powers extend beyond the realm of mere dreams, at least while the Black Gates are open."

"You did? I guess you're right. I'm not thinking yet. Listen, I think maybe you should stop Rey before she leaves this apartment. I'd go but..." she tightened the blanket around her.

"Her world is losing its foundations," said Less as he hurried after Rey. It was a common problem with changelings but usually it was due to prolonged exposure to the reality-bending pressures of their fae nature. Though, he supposed having one's partner possessed by an evil god counted.

Meanwhile, Hamilton swarming around her feet nearly sent Rey tumbling down the stairs. When she reached the bottom, he said, "Miss, don't you want to hear the slut's explanation? I certainly do."

Rey sat heavily on the bottom step and sighed. "She's probably going to say it's all my fault anyway." She buried her face in her knees, and wrapped her arms around her head to completely hide her face. "She hasn't asked me for any help since she moved out. She goes to Less instead. And it hurts." Her body started to shake as she tried to hold back the sobs that threatened to burst from her. Everything was going wrong.

Less slowed abruptly on the stairs when he realized Rey had stopped at the bottom. Her brambles had woven tightly around her in a thick impenetrable mass. He never knew what to say in these situations. "Rey, I'm sorry. We should have talked about Richard before now. Everything is happening so fast. There hasn't been time to take stock. You are an important part of our motley! That's been taken for granted, lately, I think. I'm sorry."

"It's not just that. It's the two of you, all cozy together, and I'm left out in the cold." She kept her face buried against her knees, unwilling to look at anyone or anything around her.

Bare feet padded to the top of the stairs and stopped. Mira had found a robe as soon as Less left and came out of the bedroom. She sat at the top of the staircase. *"It hurts to be the odd one out,"* she said, speaking from experience. *"It hurts to be made to feel useless."* She was reflected on the wonderful times when it felt like Rey and her were a pair, a dynamic duo against the world fighting to make their own way in the world. They were all too brief.

Mira also realized she done to Rey what she thought had been done to herself and that didn't make it right. *"I never meant to make you feel that way, Rey,"* she said softly. *"I just meant to give you space to be with your boyfriends. There wasn't a place for me there, so I went to Less. He's the most experienced of us and he listened. I did it because it felt like you wanted it that way so you could have more time with Chase and then later with Richard. I didn't do it because I didn't want your help or to listen to your advice. I did and I still do want your help. Now Richard has been taken away from you and it was insensitive of me to continue to do what I had been doing for the past six months. But it was only habit. I didn't mean to slight you. I'm sorry, Rey."*

"I never wanted you to move out, Mira," Rey said, her voice still muffled. "I rarely saw Richard as it was. Our schedules were always at odds. But it felt like you'd turned your back on me. Left me alone." And with that, Rey started to sob, her entire body caught up with the emotional pain that had finally caught up with her.

Mira moved down the stairs to join Rey and Less. *"I guess there were a lot of reasons that led me to leave your house. I knew you didn't approve of me seeing Remy. I didn't want to feel like charity. I wanted to help Amber. I didn't want to be in your way."* Mira shook her head. There were a lot of reasons. *"It was hard for me, too. Really hard. I didn't like leaving your house,"* she said gently, *"if it helps to know that. It was very hard for me, too. It just felt like the change was needed."*

"I know, it's just that everyone who once cared about me left because they didn't want me anymore," Rey said, finally lifting her head to reveal red, swollen eyes, "or thought I needed to be taught a lesson. It's hard not to believe it, even after I've matured at least a little bit."

Less sat on the step next to Rey, as close as her now limp vines would allow him. "Richard did not leave on his own accord. And we didn't leave - only drifted a little out of reach. We're listening now. We're here to help."

Cold day in hell before I tell you anything that can be used against me, Rey thought. Her brambles writhed and then settled around her body into their usual passive state. "Nothing that some sleep won't fix for now. And we need a plan for how to deal with the Key while the ritual is being performed so we don't end up hosed like Veridia's motley.

Less felt Rey's emotional gates being slammed shut. He recognized it - his own were corroded in place. The problem was that Rey would stoke her seething rage until it exploded outward again. However, he wasn't the one who could coax out a heart-to-heart. He sat with her quietly for a few moments before standing again to give her space. He waited at the bottom of the stairs.

Mira put her hand on Rey's. *"Listen. I learned something earlier today that pretty heavy. With everything else that happened... I didn't want to through more coal on the fire. But I think you need to know. If we're going to beat the Black Key and close the Gates, we've got to keep our heads. We can't do that if we keep getting blindsided with things. So here*

goes." Mira took a breath. She wasn't sure how much this had all really sunk in, either. She knew what Less had told her and she had a very strong feeling it was accurate.

"I'm the only one that can handle the Black Key and I can only do that if I can just let go and let what must happen, happen. That's why the Key keeps messing with me. It's trying to keep me distracted and paralyzed."

Mira watched Rey's face. *"How do I know that? Well that's an excellent question. Remember how I sometimes freak out when something traumatic happens? To me it's a blackout. But apparently, I get really cold and icy and I try to... to stop whatever it is that is threatening me or my friends, pushing myself beyond what I would normally do. That, apparently is a 'gift' from a Keeper."*

"This is what I've figured out so far based on the bits that Less was able to give me together with what feels right, what feels like the truth."

"I was one of those countless Lost that escaped Arcadia but were too far gone to ever make it home again. When I was Taken, my home was Detroit, Rey. But I hated my parents and my life. My Keeper took me right off the streets. I didn't want to be there. So when I escaped Arcadia I wandered the Hedge truly Lost. I would never have found my way out."

"Then a Keeper found me. I don't know what happened. I don't remember the time I spent lost in the Hedge, nor do I remember the encounter with the Keeper, but something else does. This Keeper is called the Ice Queen by some. In exchange for showing me the way to the mortal realm, she stabbed a piece of herself right into my heart. Or my soul. My first memory of my return included none of that. All I knew was that I escaped my Keeper and found myself in Mythic City, not Detroit. No one ever questioned that or my presence here. Changelings don't like to talk about that stuff."

"Now, only a year after my return, we find ourselves faced with the Black Key and the Gates of Arcadia are open. I have blackouts where something cold takes over. I can see the writing on the wall," Mira said bitterly. *"The Keepers are still using me to their own ends."*

*"The riddle says that Keepers can't touch the Key and anyone else touching it will be lost to its power. Well, I'm neither a Keeper and when the **other** me is in control, I'm not really a changeling or mortal either. I'm the loophole. I'm the only one that can take the Key away from Richard."*

Mira was carefully watching Rey's face throughout her explanation. *"Less pieced a lot of this together for one reason, Rey. The Ice Queen? She was his Keeper. He saw something familiar in me. Through hypnosis, he can contact the piece of her that's in me."* Mira met Less's eyes. *"She did something to you, too, didn't she?"*

When Less looked away, Mira nodded and continued. *"It's not your fault, Less. I think that the Ice Queen is behind all of this. I think she has been planning her move for a very long time. But I don't think it's what you might expect. I've been thinking about this really hard"*

and I feel like I've got something that feels like the truth. Will you listen?"

Rey nodded.

"This past year has been extremely difficult for me. I lost my mind a number of times and much of the time I wasn't sure what was real and what wasn't. I clawed my way back, though. I know what's real. And, my experience has given me some insights, I think.

*"I think the Black Key **is** a Keeper. I think the Gates of Arcadia is part of the same Keeper and that the Ice Queen had something to do with separating his parts. I think that all Keepers are many things at once; the more that they really are, the more powerful they are. They are constantly playing this game with each other and whole worlds are they game boards. Everyone is a game piece -- even other Keepers. But the goal of this game isn't win or lose. It's something else. Something... alien. I don't want to know what it is. It would be easier to believe it's all pointless and hopeless rather than something unknowable. The problem is we keep thinking of Keepers as individual entities with a face and hands and intent... but it's not like that at all. They can be **anything**.*

"Mortals and changelings have no defense against a Keeper -- like the Black Key -- in their own realm. With his Gates open, he's essentially created his own realm right here on earth. That means he can do whatever he wants to people and to the world, according to whatever rules he created when he set this all in motion hundreds of years ago. But he can't change those rules without changing himself; he's an immortal, a Keeper. They can't change on their own. I think that Keepers are forces of pure chaos and they only have definition through rules they apply to themselves or each other.

"Enter the Ice Queen. She discovers his plan somehow. She realizes that, as with all contracts and all Keepers, there is a loophole. Get someone who is not a Keeper, nor a not-Keeper, and you can seize control of the Black Key's game. She finds an especially stupid and foolish nymph in the Hedge and makes a deal with her. She -- me -- just wants to go home. The Ice Queen needs her pawn. The plan is hatched, practically last-minute in Keeper time.

"That brings us to here and now. I have something within me that can help us get control of the Black Key. If Imogen comes through, then we'll have a ritual to seal him away again. But to get to that part, I have to let go and allow whatever the Ice Queen put in me to take over and do what she was programmed to do.

"I don't think the Ice Queen intends to let us do that. I think that once I have the Black Key, I -- or rather the thing the Ice Queen put inside me -- might try to escape and bring the Black Queen to her master. You can't let that happen. Once I have the Key you must stop me from taking it the Queen, perform the ritual and hide the Black Key away. For any of this to have any chance of success, I have to be able to let go and allow the thing that the Ice Queen put inside me loose. I was asking Less for help with that. He knows his Keeper. But everything keeps getting tangled up in emotions and old scars that its

paralyzing us. We have to get it together! I need your help. The whole world needs your help or these Keepers will have us all in three weeks time."

"Of course I'll help," Rey replied, her voice clear and calm. The anger, turned into rage by her fears for Mira's safety and the perceived betrayal by Less, had faded by the time her motley mates had found her at the bottom of the stairs. She looked at Less. "Any ideas on how we can shut Mira down once whatever is in there is in control? And when the Gates are closed, get it out of her?"

Less scratched his head. It was uncomfortable talking about the Ice Princess. "It will only have control for a few hours. It has to fight Mira for control. And the icicle in Mira's heart has a physical manifestation. But I don't know if it can be removed without first killing Mira. Its name is Niveanne. Saying it aloud will draw her out - when we need her for the Key. Names seem to have power, maybe it can also be used to force her dormant again?" He deferred to Rey, who knew about these occult things.

"Names are just words," Rey said, "unless it's a true name." She looked between Less and Mira. "Less, you realize that whatever is in Mira, it's probably not a separate entity from your Keeper.. The Others cannot create anything new. Ever. Not life, not fetches, not even Tokens. That thing is likely another facet of her, like the Hook was a facet of another keeper." Rey rubbed her hands over her eyes. "We could be branded as loyalists, or worse, regardless of whether or not the Gates are closed. And if we don't succeed, a new Keeper may suddenly arise. Perhaps two."

"Why do you think we've been keeping this a secret for so long!" exclaimed Less. "It might be a true name - it doesn't seem to have any other, cut off from the original Keeper."

Rey's eyes locked onto Mira, wondering if saying the things name had summoned it forth.

Mira had been still as a statue from the moment Less invoked Niveanne's name. To her, it had resonated like a gong, vibrating through her body and mind. For a frightening moment she'd felt like she was drowning in icy water, but it began to recede. The experience left her shivering and weak. Her teeth chattering, she said, *"Please don't say her name again, Less, unless you really mean it."*

Mira had missed what her motley mates were saying from the moment Less called the Ice Princess until now. *"Did someone say something about creating a new Keeper?"*

Rey nodded, and when she spoke, her voice was soft, barely loud enough to travel past the three changelings. "When I was human, I had two friends. I'd have done anything for them. Anything." For a moment, her face softened, remembering her time with them, but then the mask she usually wore slid back into place. "I discovered they'd been cursed. I did not know by whom, but I wanted to find a way to lift it. To set them free." She took a deep breath, and her voice shook ever so faintly. "I researched, called in favors I was owed. Finally, I found the way to summon a being I was told I could answer my question.

"The being I summoned showed me what my friends would become if their curse ever came to fruition. They would become Keepers, a pair of Others. And then the Lord of the Crossroads decided he would give me the gift of knowledge, the experience of what it would be like to serve them. And that was how I came to be Taken.

"When I managed to find my way back home, I sought them out. But the conditions of what my Keeper had shown me when the curse was fulfilled, were no longer there. I'd hoped since they were no longer together, the chances of it happening had been greatly reduced. I've watched one of them, keeping a sharp eye out, but all the behavior that was heading her down that path no longer happens.

"But I still don't know what will trigger the curse. It could be the Gates failing to be closed. I don't know. If worse comes to worst, Queen Ishtar knows of my friends and keeps a wary eye on them." Rey picked up Hamilton, put him in her lap and cuddled him close, scratching him behind his ears the way he liked best. "All I can do is hope that I was right. That I haven't made a horrible mistake and not tried to have them killed when I could. It would have destroyed my soul, but..." She shook her head and fell silent.

Less scrubbed his hands through his already messy hair. He was beginning to realize he hadn't really gotten any sleep that night. "Two *more* Keepers!? On top of the Ice Princess, the Ice Queen, and The Black Key/Gate combination? Ugh," he sighed dejectedly.

"No," Rey said forcefully. "They're not Keepers. Not yet. They may never be."

"*Ice Princess -- wait, do you mean me? I thought the Ice Queen just stuck me with some of herself.*" Fear made her voice quaver. "*You mean I might turn into a horrible ice-monster and get stuck that way? Forever?*"

"No, no!" Less tried to comfort her. "The piece of the Other inside you can only maintain control for a short time. But you said that she might try to take the Key to a Keeper when she *is* in control. It is just something else we have to think about on top of everything else."

"Do you know that for a fact, Less?" Rey asked. "Did the Other tell you that?" She watched him closely, judging his body language, every little tick and tremor.

"*Stop it,*" Mira said tiredly. "*We are motley and sworn to help each other. Being at each other's throats only helps the Others.*"

"I'm not going after him," Rey replied in a calm voice. "I just want to know where he got the info, so we can decide if it can be trusted."

"The Other did mention it, but I am basing my statement on what I have observed when She has possessed Mira in the past. Mira always regains control after a while, which seems to annoy the Other."

"After this is over, I want it gone. Out of me."

Rey nodded, though unsure right now of how they'd accomplish it without harming Mira.

"Then I suggest we try to get some sleep," said Less. "We can continue the search for The Key tomorrow."

Mira nodded her agreement, then hugged Rey and Less each in turn before heading back up to her bed.

Rey touched Less lightly on the arm, then left, moving to Amber's bedroom. She held Hamilton close, and laid her cheek against his head. "Will you stay tonight?" she asked him, "or do you want to go prowling as you usually do?"

"I will stay of course," he assured her. When she laid down, he curled up next to her, spreading his little paws over her stomach.

When light broke into the apartment a few hours later, it seemed too soon. Some were more tired than others, and the motley woke up at irregular intervals. Less woke to the sound of a microwave running on high while Rey woke to the sound of loud purring.

Rey opened her eyes to see where Hamilton was, intending to give his belly a good morning scrubbing. She found him still draped across her stomach. "Good morning," she said, scritchng her friend between the ears before moving her hand down to give the appropriate attention to his belly.

Less roused himself and groggily checked his phone messages. After tugging on his shirt and trousers, which had been hung carefully over the backs of chairs, he proceeded to the kitchen to investigate. This being Mira's apartment, there might actually be some jarmyn tea.

As Less discovered the tea, Mira's breakfast dinged in the microwave. She removed a hot bowl of oatmeal, dropped a pat of butter on it and sprinkled it with sugar and cinnamon. She had plenty and offered to make for Less, and when Rey appeared, her too. She had toast and jelly to go with, but she was out of hedge fruit (much to the relief of her friends).

They'd managed to sleep through most of the morning, but it was much needed rest.

"I called work," Mira signed. "I'm needed tonight but we have other priori--"

Less's phone rang. When he checked the caller ID, it showed it was from the phone in his apartment and he remembered Imogen was working on locating a current incarnation of the ancient sisterhood of priestesses that had potentially kept lore on how to contain and control the Black Key. He stepped away to speak with her, leaving Rey, Hamilton and Mira in the kitchen.

"I want to apologize for the drama last night," Rey said softly. "And I'm afraid I may be getting you involved with more."

Mira tilted her head curiously. "More?"

Rey glanced at Less, then set Hamilton down and turned her attention fully back to Mira. "Veridia appears to be losing the Crown," she signed, "and even if she doesn't, I don't think she will be strong enough to continue to lead our Court. Lydia is the next strongest contender I can think of for the throne, and but she will be distracted by what happened to Veridia." She took a deep breath, then as she slowly and softly let it out, she signed "I am going to try and earn Autumn's favor and become the Ashen Queen."

Mira never skipped a beat. "I could visit the hospital and put a pillow over Veridia's face until she stops squirming. That should free up the crown. All you have to do then, is kick Lydia's ass."

"Thanks for your support of confidence," Rey signed with a wry smile, "But I think it'll take more than just taking down Lydia to get the throne and keep it."

"Wait. Are you being serious?" Mira signed.

Rey nodded.

Mira considered for a minute. "Of course you have my support. Veridia has let too many posts go unfilled for too long. She tries to keep too much power for herself. She's a control freak. It's time someone comes to power who will share it with the other Autumn changelings. There are thirty of us! We shouldn't have to go around blindly doing whatever Veridia says. She's unable to lead now and where does that leave us? There are only three leading positions now and the Paladin is missing. That means there is only you and Lydia to pick up the reigns and before it is Autumn's time to rule! The Duchy needs proper leadership."

"I'd like to think I'd do a good job of it," Rey signed. "It's too much effort and too much stress. Machiavelli says is it better to be loved as a ruler, but if you can't do that, then rule by fear. People who like and respect their regent are more likely to be willing to go beyond what they are called to do, for both their own benefit and for the benefit of those around them."

"Machiavelli was a jerk," Mira signed. "Don't be Machiavelli. Be the kind of person people want to follow and you'll do fine," she assured Rey.

Rey couldn't help but chuckle. "He may have been a jerk, but the points he made were valid at the time. I'm hoping, though, that if I'm not acting as I should, you'll take me to task in private. And I will do my best to keep my temper under control."

Mira smiled at that. Then she got down to the business of numbers and strategizing. "Well,

"I'm not sure how you want to approach this," she said as she began to pace. "There are six Autumn Beasts, four Darklings, five Elementals, five Fairests, three Ogres, and seven Wized of Autumn. Of all those, Richard, Sissy, Lydia, Veridia, and Alyson hold offices for court. Many offices are still empty, abandoned, or unused. Richard, Lydia and Sissy are all in the same motley, and Alyson is just the Lady Scrivener -- a court recorder, which means Veridia controls all power over Autumn. She shares with no one she doesn't directly have her hooks into." She paused to look at Rey. "I'm sorry that includes your Richard, but it's the truth. Those two have been conspiring not just against me but for Autumn since Richard joined after the war."

"No need to apologize," Rey said. "I've come to realize that Witch of the Bitter Wind is a mostly empty title anyway." A little frown danced across her face before she pushed the negativity away. "I've wondered if Veridia has been using Richard to spy on me, and what Richard would do if Veridia told him to break it off with me. He has a lot more to lose than I in defying her." She sighed. "What do you know of what they've done?"

"They mistrusted me because of who I choose to associate with. Veridia attempted to directly control me, making me just a mouthpiece for her own will by using her ghost allies. She says she cares for me and was trying to look out for me, and I think in her own way she was. But she also doesn't respect me or my right to make my own decisions. Richard mistrusted me for his own reasons, but you should know better than I if he's a spy." Mira continued. "I was so grateful to her all the time because I thought she treated me specially. She did, but it was for her own ends, not because she cared. I only realized what kind of person she was when she threatened to order Richard to execute me. That's all I know about what they've done."

"Ishtar and Storm, they're not like that with their people, right?" Rey asked. "So controlling and manipulative?" If she learned about the other regents, she might gain insight into them, and possibly how to approach them in an effort to build less confrontational relationships with them and their Courts.

"King Storm? His style is different. I think he just allows his people to claim what titles they would. As long as they obey his word he doesn't care. Ishtar does her own thing, setting up her court differently than Summer or Autumn. She did away with several positions and instead created an entire council of advisers from a cross-section of Spring changelings instead. She listens to them, but reserves the right to make whatever decision she deems best for Spring."

"Both have their benefits and drawbacks," Rey replied. "I think I can wait to make a decision about that. I have to become Queen first to implement anything. And none of it will matter if we can't stop the Key."

Less wandered to the balcony to look out over the city while he talked. "Imogen? Do you

have news about the priestesses?"

"I do, Less. I was able to make an educated guess about what was going on and find a few areas that certain knowledge spirits *don't* know about. Gaps like that usually occur in places where spirits can't pry or that is more alien to them even than our own physical world. In doing so I was able to fix on a map lots of areas around the city that have become corrupted or changed by some outside force. Something more along line of things you might know about rather than me. Once I ruled them out, I was able to find one other place that had similar traits. A place about which no spirit entity has any knowledge of and so was conspicuous to me. Anyway, this gets even more boring and I won't drag out ever detail. The short version is that I think I found a what appears to be an old missionary settlement right outside of Santa Fe. About four years ago, it was purchased by something called the Star Foundation?"

"Star Foundation? That sounds pretty phoney to me."

"Well, this group portrayed themselves as a historical preservation society. They bought the place and went to work on it, but it was never opened to the public. Information from Google Maps is weeks old, but it shows plenty of cars and activity there. And get this; the members number some 20 people, every one of them women. Not only that, but this is one place that spirits know nothing about. There is some kind of ward in place there and I'll bet you morning coffee it's not just blocking spirits, either. In fact, as good as the ward is, I'm betting they have an immortal with them. Therefore, I think I should come with you and your friends on this. I can help."

The setup rang Less' alarm bells. Remote place, no information, inviting herself along. All trademarks of a double-cross and trap. He forced himself not to react to his gut. He had already satisfied himself that Imogen was not a plant by the dragons, and this was their only lead on The Black Key. "Good work! I'll try and dig up anything else might be out there about the mission and the Star Foundation, then we'll come by and pick you up."

"I'll be here," she said. "Wait, Less? I need to stop by a place I know on the way after you pick me up, if that's all right."

"I guess so. What do you need?"

"Near my house, the one that was flattened by the accursed dragon, there is an ancient spring once used by the natives for hundreds of years. It has since become a place of power." Her angst at the dragon made her odd Carib-Irish accent show through just a little when she recalled what he did to her home. "I needed to spend a good bit of power in trade for this information. The old spring will help me recharge before we face this next group. I could also give healing your friend another crack then."

His thoughts of treachery faded into the background. "Excellent. I'll let the others know and we'll be by once we're prepared." With that he hung up and returned to tell the others the good news.

After hearing Less's report, Mira was excited to begin chasing their new lead. She put even little thought into, and retreated upstairs to her room to find something appropriate for this rather warm, spring day.

"We're about to go into the fortress of an unknown force," said Less. "I trust Imogen but the priestesses won't necessarily be happy to be found. It won't be like dealing with Ishtar. We will have to hope that they understand the urgency that we work together."

"Who of us will be doing the talking then?" Rey asked.

"You can have a silver tongue when you want to," said Less. *When you keep your temper.* "Imogen can give you some background on who this Immortal might be. You have experience with the occult. Autumn Court values seem to align well with groups such as these priestesses. I think you should do the talking."

"Okay," Rey said with a nod. "I probably ought to find out what I can from Imogen before we go in. Knowing some of their background or any tips for dealing with them will be a big help."

"Is it worthwhile you stopping by the hospital to see Veridia? That diary of hers might give you some deeper insight."

"I don't know," Rey said. "As badly as she was injured, I don't know if she'll be conscious, let alone able to talk." She didn't say getting into the room to see Veridia might be a challenge anyway; with Lydia there to deny them, it'd be difficult to convince the hospital she was family.

"You could talk to Lydia. She would know just as much about it."

"Not necessarily," Rey replied. "Just because we're in the same Court does not mean we share everything we know with each other."

"Okay. Is there anything else we should be bringing with us to Santa Fe? What does one bring to the home of a secret order of priestesses? A bottle of wine seems a bit inadequate."

The corners of Rey's mouth twitched. "Showing up with a gift, even a wrong one, could be bad. How to approach them was one thing I'd planned on asking Imogen. If she hasn't got any ideas, then we'll just wing it, I guess."

"You don't think a gift is a good idea?" Less asked. The book on mortal etiquette he had read said the guest should bring the host a small gift. "Something to show our respect for them?"

"We're not their dinner guests," Rey said. "We're going to them, hoping to convince them

to help us. Or to let us help them in their ritual to capture and imprison the Key. Anything we present them will be a bribe, and you don't want to risk offending someone by offering the wrong bribe."

"Fair enough." Less was convinced. "How are your Glamour reserves? We should fill up before the trip."

"I've only used a tiny bit," Rey replied. I should be fine.

"Good. Let's eat and head out. Imogen needs to make a stop before we get to the priestesses."

Mira joined them and the group headed out to pick up Imogen at Less's apartment. They found her waiting and ready to leave so they proceeded west out of the city and into the mountains. This gave the group to catch up on what Imogen found.

"So, *where are we going?*" Mira asked.

Mira was in the front seat with Rey and Imogen and Less were in the back of Rey's car. Less saw Imogen stare at Mira for a moment, before she said, "Your voice is... very unusual."

"Thanks."

Imogen then said, "We're heading to my place. I need to recharge myself, so to speak, because I've been using a lot of power lately."

"What is the source of your power?" Rey asked, curious about the woman.

"There can be many, but only one place I know is safe." Imogen decided that letting these people know what it was wouldn't cause harm since their source of power was surely very different from her own. "There is a natural and very ancient spring there that has been used for a well for many centuries. Since before I came to these lands and before any other white people came as well. It was sacred to a people long since vanished, and important to others that came after. It's now a place of power from which I can recharge my own abilities."

Rey felt more than saw Mira's body tense. She recalled that Mira had been held captive by her Keeper in such a place, although that was in Arcadia, or perhaps the Hedge.

"You don't actually live at the spring, do you?" Rey wanted to try and slight change the subject, not wanting to cause her friend any more discomfort. The spring, though, interested Rey very much. It sounded like a locus, and something that would definitely interest Lyla and the pack.

"Yes, of course I do. Or I did. I'll have to try and see if my cabin can be restored." She was

thoughtful for a moment as she considered ways to rebuild it considering her general lack of money. She was adept at information brokering. Therein might lie the solution.

An unguarded locus, Rey thought, is not a very good thing. Any Pure could just sweep in and take it. "Did you lose everything when your cabin was destroyed?"

"This will be my first time back," Imogen explained. "The dragon took me when he destroyed my home. I assume everything is in shambles or ruined because he flattened the place when I tried to run there for cover."

"*You were outside when he came for you?*" Mira asked.

"Uh... sort of. I was in the outhouse." Her wry expression held a mixture of wry bitterness and embarrassment. "When I came out and saw him, I ran for the house, but he got there first and squashed it flat. Then he grabbed me up, going on about virgins and took off with me. He didn't give me a chance to explain I wasn't what he thought I was until much later, when he took me into his lair. And then he got mad and killed me."

"Killed you," was Rey's response.

"Yes," Imogen said. She went on to explain. "The dragon said he could smell virgins. I'm not a virgin but I smelled that way to him. I would guess it's due to the fact that if I'm killed my spirit rebuilds my body like it was new. Without scars, marks or sign of my true age at all. The dragon noticed and put me in a cage that prevented my spirit from leaving and then decided I wasn't human enough, thank God. But he did think I was a fine trophy and so he kept me in the cage like a trophy. If Less hadn't found me and pushed the cage off me, I could have been trapped in that awful place indefinitely. If not for that hells-spawned cage I could have slipped between the cracks between worlds and have been gone. But my soul is as much spirit as anything anymore. I couldn't so much as touch the bars of that thing. I'm glad it's gone forever."

Rey wasn't. It would be very valuable to her. She made a mental note to herself to ask Less about it, and see if it might be salvaged.

"*Wait.*" Mira turned in her seat and looked at Less. "*Imogen, you are both immortal and a human?*"

Less looked back at her with puzzlement. "What are you saying? Do you think Imogen somehow ties in with the riddle of the Key?"

"*I don't know,*" Mira said, "*but I think it's something to think about.*"

Imogen didn't know what the two of them were discussing, but she answered Mira's question. "I stopped really being human a long time ago, Mira."

"How long?" Rey couldn't help but ask.

"I've lost track I'm afraid. I was never very good at math. But I remember I was born July the second, sixteen sixty five in Barbados.

"*You're four centuries old?*" Mira exclaimed incredulously.

"Almost 357," Rey said. She had no real reason to doubt the woman's age. "How did you end up out here near Santa Fe?"

"That's a long story," Imogen said with a faint smile. "You'll want to turn here." Imogen guided them up a mountain road. "It gets a little rough up ahead. They don't maintain my road very well. Watch for fallen rock." She sat back and said, "To sum up, my mother moved to Boston after her indentured service was up but after me father died. Things went poorly and I found myself in my present condition. When an end was finally put to the Trials, I wandered west over the long years. I couldn't settle, you know. I don't age. I only stopped moving about when I found my place here."

"Must be something of a lonely experience," Rey said softly, keeping an eye on the road.

Imogen didn't answer at first. Her silence was telling. Her life had been profoundly lonely, in fact. She had no family and she'd outlived every friend she'd ever made. "Aye," said quietly. "Very."

"Perhaps, then, if we survive the current crisis," Rey replied, "you might be able to find a friend or two amongst your new acquaintances." She glanced up into the review mirror and gave Imogen a little smile in it.

Imogen returned the smile and showed it to Less, as well.

They arrived at last at a little cabins that was severely damaged. The location was certainly remote -- it was barely a road near the end, and more like an emergency fire trail. Imogen had no car of her own. It had a separate little well and an outhouse at the back that was still standing. Trees and scrub stood everywhere, though it had been cleared from the immediate area of the cottage. In all, it looked to be a quaint, if forgotten little home that was a throwback from the nineteenth century. Only now it was pretty thoroughly crushed by something large.

Imogen sighed as she got out of the car and surveyed the damage. It was about as bad as she'd thought. She turned to the others. "I'm going to head to the spring. It's just over the ridge there." She pointed past her house. That was uphill from where they stood and there was no obvious indication that anything lay in that direction.

Less decided Imogen probably wanted privacy so he stayed near the ruin of the cabin, casually looking around the homestead.

After casting a glance at the cabin, Mira left the car and hurried after Imogen, with Rey

close behind.

The immortal witch walking quickly up the rise. After she crested the ridge, a depression could be seen filled with crystal clear water. It was about twenty yards across and the wall was sheer most of the way around. However, a kind of stair had been roughly hewn in the stone uncounted centuries ago. It was narrow and hugged the walls below the ridge until it ran to the water's edge. There was only a little bit of a shore, enough to stretch out or squat and collect some water.

Imogen knelt there. "I will seem to go to sleep. Please don't disturb me. I must leave my body for a time."

"*Wait, how long--*" Mira tried to ask, but then Imogen slumped and fell over on her side.

Afraid she'd roll into the spring and drown, the nymph hurried down the stairs and stopped next to Imogen. But the witch didn't roll or even touch the water, so Mira withdrew her outstretched hands and looked around the spring.

Part of her loved it. Part of her feared it. The mixed emotions warred on her face.

Rey felt a measure of envy, and almost regretted following. Before she'd been Taken, she'd have been able to see the locus and the spirits that would have come there. Perhaps even seen what Imogen was doing to collect the locus' energy.

She felt tears beginning to form, and tore here eyes off the water to look at Mira. "You okay?" she asked her friend.

"*I'm fine,*" Mira said. She looked at Rey and asked, "*Are you? You seem upset.*"

Rey shook her head. "Just memories from before."

Imogen sat up and looked around after a few minutes. Seeing Mira and Rey there, she smiled and said, "Hey. I'm going to cast a ward around this place to prevent all creatures and living being from coming in here since I won't be here to protect. You should probably return to the top of the ridge."

"*Seriously? And that really holds up?*"

Imogen nodded and smiled.

"*Just like that? Doesn't it cost you like part of your soul or something?*"

Imogen shook her head once. "No. It is an act of will for me, a small effort."

She waited for Mira and Rey to start back up the path. As they went, Rey heard Mira

mutter, *"I think I got ripped off."*

"What do you mean?" Rey asked.

"Aurra said that to make the wards I asked for cost her deeply and weakened her for a long time. In exchange I had to grant her three wishes, a promise backed by the Wyrd to give her something of like value she used one of the wishes I gave her. It can be anything in my power to grant." She went on. *"At the time I had been terrified of what my enemies might do. I was willing to pay any price to have a safe place. Now I can't be sure if Aurra was honest with me."*

"A witch will charge whatever they think they can get away with," Rey replies softly. "And we don't know if the ward Imogen just put into place is permanent. Permanency often takes a big toll on the caster."

Mira nodded and relaxed a little at that. She might be jumping to conclusions. After all, Imogen was different from anyone they'd met before, so surely her powers were different, too.

Meanwhile, Less was waiting for his friends to return. It would prove to be a short wait, but in that time, he couldn't help but notice some things of interest visible through the ruined walls of the cabin. He noticed what looked to be old-time dresses and underclothes that a woman of the 19th century might wear. A few delicate cups lay cracked and broken, in one section, but he thought he spotted an intact teapot, a couple saucers and one cup. Finally, he noticed near the ruined doorway, an old leather-bound journal. It had no title, but a little brass clasp. It looked very old.

Less couldn't resist prying out secret knowledge and so he flipped open the book. He thought it was probably Imogen's diary and he felt a twinge of guilt. It surprised him. He had been faced with the consequences of invading Mira's privacy so very recently and so much of Imogen's life had been taken from her recently. It didn't stop him from browsing through the pages, however, keeping his various extra eyes open for danger or the return of the others.

The script was a little difficult to read at first because of the antiquated style used, but Less rapidly was able to catch on to most of it. The first section was very old and held up Imogen's account of her early years, as she told it to Less. Flipping past that, he saw the books was filled with things she learned, odd spells or rituals dealing with calling spirits, notes on otherworldly locations and the bizarre creatures that dwelled there, and notes on her travels.

Those were most immediately understandable. She had apparently met beings that were part spirit and part human, in some ways similar to herself. There were Indian names for these that didn't mean anything to him, though her sketches helped him identify cat-folk and what looked like some kind of fox-woman.

Not knowing how much time he had, Less flipped rapidly through the pages, stopping only at the most immediately interesting ones. He was able to determine that Imogen's journey west was gradual and moved just ahead of the main thrusts of white settlement until she arrived here.

More recent entries were dated to within the past decade. Here she wrote about werewolves. It was far from the first time she'd noted them, but this seemed most relevant for today. Apparently, in exchange for their protection and freedom to explore and interact on her own in a place called the Shadow Realm, she had agreed to provide information to werewolves that called themselves the Pure. She noted they left her alone most times.

Her final notes were dated a couple years ago where she wrote that the Pure mentioned the Forsaken have come and that they were at war. She hadn't heard from them since so Imogen assumed the worst, and apparently this was backed up by reports from her "contacts" in the Shadow Realm; the Pure had been killed or driven off. Now there was only Forsaken werewolves active in the area. Because Imogen feared their reaction to her, she notes that she intended to live in seclusion and wait for the Pure to return one day, as they always do.

As he read that last bit, he noticed the tops of the heads of his friends beginning to crest the ridge. There was so much information packed into that journal that he had no time to read, it had to be disappointing. A person might spend literally years studying it to understand everything.

Less flipped the book closed and fastened the clasp, leaving it where he found it.

Rey, Imogen and Mira returned, greeting Less as they arrived near the car.

"Wait, Mira?" Imogen asked for the nymph's attention. She stopped and looked at Imogen.

"May I take a look at your injury? With my powers back, I could give healing your injuries another try. I can't promise it will work, but it might be worth a try."

Mira was wearing a dress over the bandaged wound through her stomach.

"We can go over there, behind that scrub for privacy."

Mira shrugged. "*Nothing Rey and Less haven't seen before.*" Imogen looked uncomfortable with that, so Mira added, "*But that's fine. We can go over there. And thanks.*"

Imogen took Mira to some privacy to have a look, leaving Less and Rey alone for a moment.

"Find anything interesting?" Rey asked Less.

"Not much," he said. "Just some evidence that werewolves were protecting the area. Are

your friends known as The Forsaken?"

"What evidence?" Rey asked. "Like the markings they put on trees?"

"Maybe." He didn't want Rey to fly into a rage at Imogen just yet. "Are you going to answer the question?"

"Only if you tell me what evidence you found," Rey replies easily and without heat, "and where you heard that name."

Less considered letting the matter drop. He didn't really care about the information and telling Rey invaded Imogen's privacy even more. Eventually he decided he'd try to make up for keeping secrets about the Ice Princess from her. "Imogen wrote something about the war between the Pure and the Forsaken. Mira told me that the bad apple werewolves we ejected from her pond were the Pure. I wondered if your friends were the Forsaken, and what they were forsaken from?"

"They call themselves Uratha," Rey said, "but they are also called the Forsaken. I can't tell you exactly where the term came from, but I can tell you the story of how the two opposing groups came to be. A long time ago, before Man walked the realms, there were Father Wolf and Mother Luna and their children. Father Wolf was murdered, and Luna cursed their children for killing him. The children separated into what became two groups: the Pure and the Forsaken. The Pure hate Luna, and the Forsaken because Luna has partially forgiven them for their ancestors' actions. Neither group is particularly friendly towards humans or, really, anyone else, but if you had to deal with werewolves, the Uratha would be the less dangerous choice. They prefer not to deal with humans unless they have to, but the Pure are like Keepers when it comes to humans."

Less didn't think that anything could be compared to Keepers. "So, the two groups are basically the same except one treats humans as playthings."

"No," Rey replied in a firm tone. "There are other differences."

"Oh, naturally! But not having the keen senses of a wolf I'm sure those differences would be lost on me."

A little smile curved Rey's lips. "For the record, the markers the werewolves set up to indicate their territories aren't anything you or I could see. Not even me with my wolf senses."

"I gather Imogen recharged herself at the spring?" said Less, changing the subject.

"She did, and placed some protections on the spring." Rey looked over toward where Mira and Imogen had gone.

"Protections that you might want to warn the Forsaken about should they come sniffing

around?"

Rey shrugged. "Why would I do that?"

"No reason. I was just asking if Imogen's protections were deadly."

Rey shook her head. "Then ask that. You don't need to beat around the bush if you want information from me. But no, she put up a ward similar to what Aurra cast on Mira's apartment, I'd have to guess. Oh, and that reminds me. Mira told me that she'd paid Aurra for the wards with wishes. With how Mira's memories of Drake disappeared so completely, I wonder if one of those wishes were involved. I see no reason for Aurra to want to separate Mira and Drake, so perhaps she traded it to someone for something else."

"Interesting theory," admitted Less. "Such tokens are easily handled as currency."

Mira and Imogen returned. Mira was smiling and holding the bandage formerly covering her injury. She was smiling when she told Less, "*You're friend is a miracle worker. Literally.*"

"'Twas just a bit o' luck," Imogen said modestly. "It doesn't always work as well."

"We really appreciate the help you're giving us," Rey said.

Imogen shook her head. "Not at all. What you are doing affects everyone. I want to do my part. Besides, Less freed me from indefinite imprisonment. I'll never forget that."

Less was embarrassed. He had actually forced Imogen to stay in her cage for quite a long while as he grilled her with questions to justify his releasing her. "Do you need anything from inside? Clothing? Treasured possessions?"

Imogen paused and gazed at the ruin. She shook her head. "I do, but what we are doing is more important. We can come back here and see --- wait." She trotted over and picked up her journal. "I can't believe this is intact! I've had this forever."

She returned to the others. "The rest is just memories and clothes that don't seem to match the fashions I see in the city."

"*How did you survive out here all by yourself?*" Mira asked.

"Most things I grew or made myself. Things that I couldn't, well I have a stash of old gold coins that I used to get into from time to time. They are really hard to convert into usable money anymore though. Banks ask a lot of questions I can't answer. That's made me pretty much broke for the past twelve years, except for what I could trade for."

"*Trade? With who?*"

Imogen seemed reluctant. "Well... there are some people who do pretty well outside

civilization. People very adept at living out here. They used to come around asking to use the spring and... other reasons. I found it easier to deal with them if I let them do that. Sometimes I could trade a few coins for other things I needed, like cloth or tools. They aren't very friendly to outsiders, but their forefathers knew me back when I was more active in events around here, so they dealt with me where they might otherwise not have been friendly to me either."

"These people, they didn't try to take the spring from you?" Rey asked. From what she remembered Lyla telling her about the area, it was Pure-held for a very, very long time. It was likely, then, Imogen had had dealings with the Pure.

She shook her head. "No. They respected me because of who I am and what I have done. Besides, I let them use it when they wanted and kept out any competition. I gave them few reasons to want to do that."

"I suppose you're lucky, then, to have encountered one of the more tolerant groups of the Pure," Rey said easily, though she watched to see what Imogen's reaction might be. "With most of them gone from the area, it must be more difficult to get what you need, and to defend yourself from other predators."

"So, you know I deal with werewolves," Imogen said.

Mira hadn't. She looked surprised.

Imogen said, "Yes, I've noticed they stopped coming around. But predators I would worry about see me as simply another mortal and that's not a threat to them. I keep my spring clear of hostile things and should something come around I can't deal with, I have a far stronger and better hidden refuge to retreat to."

"How come you didn't retreat, then, when the dragon came?"

"I never had the chance. That monster was faster and more powerful than anything I'd ever seen before. That Less and all of you defeated it is... extremely impressive."

"There's another one out there," Rey said, "even more powerful. The eldest brother. But that's a worry for another time. There are some things our motley could help you with, to make your life easier." A genuine little smile curved her lips. "And I would love to be able to talk with you about what you can do. I used to interact with spirits all the time."

Imogen's eyes brightened. "Yes, absolutely. It's been a long time since I had anyone I could talk to about things like that."

"Guys? We should probably get moving." Mira was impatient to see what these priestesses or cultists or whatever they were might be able to tell them about securing the Key.

Rey nodded. "What can you tell us about the priestesses? We can't afford to offend

them."

"They've been guarding this Black Key for a very long time, far longer than I've been alive," Imogen said. "But they are human beings and perhaps over time their vigilance weakened. I just know that the Key must have escaped from them somehow, or was freed. Still, even if they aren't what they once were, they must have a bond of sisterhood to have worked in concert enough to buy that monastery and work together to fix it up. They also must have had something to contain this Key for so long."

Rey thought about the crushed box they'd seen at the parking structure, and hoped that wasn't the only one around. "What would be the best way to approach them?"

"The reason the Key escaped might be their fault, but it might not be. We don't want to assume or offend. I suggest being up front with them. Ask for their help, not the other way around. The older an organization is, the more pride in itself it seems to accumulate. Don't scare them, either. If you have powers similar to the Key's you could frighten them into being uncooperative."

"You mentioned that there was another immortal like you involved. Can you tell us about this person?" asked Less.

Imogen looked at Less and said, "Oh! I'm sorry. You did ask about that before and I don't believe I answered you. Please forgive me. I mentioned the possibility of them having an immortal with them because of the presence of a powerful ward that protects the monastery. I don't know of any other immortals in the area, just that it's a good ward. We can't really know if it will block us from the premises there or not until we get there, but I do know that it blocked the spirits I contacted to check on the place."

"If they can see through the Veil," Rey said, "we might have a problem if they associate all of our kind with the Key and its evil."

"Then we should take care to reinforce our Masks, in case that helps," offered Less.

"And hiding what we are might only make things worse." Rey shook her head. "No, we need to be open and honest with them. And we'd better get going."

With nothing left for them at Imogen's ruined cabin, Less held the back door open of Rey's car for the immortal witch.

While Rey and Mira got in front, Imogen was unused to chivalry and she was surprised. Momentarily discombobulated, she didn't know if she should go head first or butt first. She opted for head first and ended up having to crawl around to get in her seat properly. She blushed with some embarrassment.

Moments later, they were bouncing along the fire trail on their way back toward Santa Fe.

The sun glared down mercilessly this dry, dusty afternoon but the group arrived at the remote-ish monastery without incident. The place looked like it might have once been converted into a ranch but not seems to have reinforced the old monastery trappings. Parking was available outside the enclosure and there were several cars there currently. Huge doors, freshly replaced with new oak heavily stained and sealed against the weather guarded the way to the courtyard. Few windows were present and those that were featured only small, barred openings.

Power lines graced the hill up to the monastery, however, and drooped up to the wall where it reached a terminal on the outside. Other evidence of modern updates included the doorbell mounted to the right of the huge double doors.

Less surveyed the structure as he stepped from the car. The old clay walls had a permanence that usually reassured him, but this time it only raised the hair on the back of his neck. Inside lived a small group of women who had walled themselves off from outside society in order to maintain the prison of The Black Key. That, and to teach their heirs the same vocation. As he followed the others to the front door, he wondered where the heirs came from in a sisterhood walled off from outside intervention.

Rey looked over at Imogen. "I don't remember if you told us, but do you know what the sisterhood of priestesses call themselves?" She was thinking of what to say. Should she go for the jugular right off, or try to get within their walls first?

Imogen shook her head apologetically. "I got my information from spirits adept at collecting information, but unfortunately things we think are important aren't to them. Names are on the list of things they don't find terribly interesting."

"Don't I know it," Rey said with a wry chuckle. "Well, let's get this going." She got out of the car, and as she waited for Mira and Imogen to join her and Less, she looked around to see if there were any kind of surveillance cameras in the area.

"Time for introductions," said Less as they reached the threshold. He swung the point of his umbrella up and pressed the doorbell.

The response was an enormous bong from inside. A minute later the massive door opened a little. An athletic-looking blonde with blue eyes and a wide mouth answered. She looked to be in her early thirties. "I'm sorry," she told them, "we don't accept solicitors and we are not open to the public. Have a nice day."

She then closed the door again.

Mira frowned. "*That was kinda rude.*"

"We've come about the Black Key," Rey said, her voice raised but calm, hoping the woman would be able to hear her.

"So much for making a good impression," said Less. He pressed the doorbell again and rapped loudly on the door with his umbrella handle for good measure.

It opened again. The women watched them carefully then stepped back and opened the door wider, as if offering to let them inside, though she said nothing. Beyond they could see a small, cobbled courtyard decorated with large potted plants that included small trees and large cacti. The woman waited for them to enter.

The doorway was easily large enough to admit them two at a time. Rey and Less went first, but immediately met unseen resistance.

"I thought only vampires had to be invited in," muttered Less. He prudently waited for Rey to explain to the priestess that they had come about their lost property.

Rey put her hand up and gently reached out until her hand met the resistance of the ward, then she looked at the woman while her hand rested against the invisible wall. "We have come looking for your help to capture the Black Key and return it to its prison. But it will cost us to try and force our way past your wards. Will you allow us in temporarily, under a bond of peace, so we may speak with your sisterhood and plead our case?"

She looked warily at the group. "That ward only stops non-humans. Stay back!"

"Look, we want to talk to you about the *Eochair Dubh*. If you won't let us in, come out to us. Or get us some chairs and we'll sit here and talk through the door. It doesn't matter as long as we discuss your *raison d'etre*. The Black Gates of Arcadia are open and the entire world is at risk."

She stared at Less a long moment, then said, "Wait here." She shut the door. A few minutes later, both doors open and the motley sees the door-woman along with a number of other women now, some of the armed with hunting rifles and shotguns. But the door-woman defers to a wiry, middle-aged woman with greying brown hair.

"I'm Mayra," she said. "Who are you?"

"I am Rey Lafitte," Rey replied, her Louisiana accent making her voice smooth and pleasant. "This is Less, and Mira." She indicated her two motley mates, and kept her hands in plain sight. "And this is Imogen. While not one of us, she is trying to help us stop the Black Key."

"What do you know of this *Eochair Dubh*?" asked Mayra suspiciously.

"It's been performing some kind of far-reaching ritual in Mythic," Rey said. "It is opening up doorways and gates between this world and the realms of faerie, and that world is already intruding into this one. In a few weeks, we fear the process will be complete and Mythic will be lost. Some of our people have already tried once to capture it, using the ritual of Quietus, but it tricked the humans nearby into attack, and they failed. One of

them is paralyzed, and may die. The *Eochair Dubh* possesses people, and it now has the man I love." She could feel the tears forming in her eyes again, and though she fought to keep them from falling, she made no attempt to hide what she felt. "Please help us."

Many of the other women there looked to Mayra, who considered carefully. She took in the grief on Rey's face, but was unyielding. "You look human, but aren't. What are you people?"

"Touched by the fae, they are," Imogen piped up. She slipped between Rey and Less and stepped toward the women. "Through no fault of their own, any more than you choose your own birth mothers."

Mayra frowned. A few of the other women raised rifles and shotguns at Imogen. She stopped and held her hands out. "And you?" Mayra asked.

"Human. But also immortal."

One of the women said to Mayra, "Like the prophet!"

"But a woman," said another.

Mayra looked wary. "And what is your part in all this?"

"These are good people," Imogen said. "I trust them. They helped me and I want to help them, too."

"What is it you want with the Key, immortal?"

"Nothing. I don't want the Key. Only to help my friends," Imogen stated.

Mayra looked at the others. "We know of the Black Key and we know what it can do." She flicked her hand and the other women stopped pointing their weapons at the motley. "The question is whether you are lying about your intent or not. You could be working for the Key."

"We're not," Rey said. "Apart from our word or sworn oaths, I don't know if is anything we can do to prove it."

"There is a way," Mayra said, "to ensure our mutual trust, or at least reliability. But first we have to establish whether we can help one another. You have an immortal; we have one, too, the prophet. We know a ritual that will calm the Key, somewhat, but no creatures of this world or the other can touch the Key and remain themselves."

Less looked at Mira. "We might have a solution to that problem. A loophole in the Key's workings."

Mira nodded, encouraging her friends to expand on it. She didn't want to raise her voice to these people since they were already paranoid about them. Rey stayed quiet as well. Less was the one who brought it up, he would be the one to explain it, plus she really didn't know how having a part of Less' Keeper inside Mira as the Ice Princess would help at all.

Less took the hint. "The legend of the Black Key states that only a True Fey may control the key but never touch it. Anyone else who touches will be lost to it's power. Mira here can detect the Key and has a deep affinity for it because she is part True Fey. We believe she may be able to touch the Key without it corrupting her. Can you help us return the Key to it's prison?"

Mayra nodded. "Possibly. To even get close to the Key you'll need to calm it so that it doesn't use others to disrupt you and escape. But how do we know we can trust you? For all we know you want to claim the Key for yourselves."

"What do you want from us?" Rey asked, her voice still haggard from her grief. "A pound of our flesh? All three of us were Taken by things like the Key. Our very souls nearly destroyed by Them. The damn thing is trying to extend Arcadia into this world and create a new domain here. Every living thing will be twisted if they even survive it. We *can't* let that thing win. We need to stop it and time is running *out*." Rey poured her heart and soul into her words, trying desperately to get Mayra to believe her and agree to help.

"You're right," Mayra said coldly. The woman seemed to have a heart of stone. "The stakes are very high. And that's why we can't afford to make mistakes at this stage of the game. You need us for the ritual and to seal the Key away once it's caught. We may or may not need you, but if you are willing to take the risk and also know of the dangers the Key is unleashing in the world, that makes you useful to us."

Mayra watched them thoughtfully a moment. "We require an exchange. Some of us will go with you, ones that know the ritual. One of you must remain here."

Rey and Less each felt a hand on their shoulder. When they looked at Mira, she signed, "It has to be me. I would be the one they are most worried about. I'll remain here and when you have figured out where the Key and the Bearer are, they must bring me to you."

Rey hated to say it, but Mira was a weak link, the most unpredictable part of the plan. The Ice Princess was probably spinning some story to Less, leading him around by his balls. Rey hoped that they wouldn't need to call upon her and risk losing Mira.

"If you're sure," Rey signed back, then her eyes moved to Imogen. The priestesses said they had an immortal. A prophet. Could it be that he could handle the Key safely? And if so, did that mean Imogen could as well? She was likely far more spirit than human. Did that mean whatever it was that allowed the Others to take humans, and the Key to possess humans and Changelings, might not work on Imogen?

Less recognized the look in Rey's eyes. It was possible that Immortals could handle the Key but it was impossible to test. Unless these priestesses knew something. "What does your prophet have to say about the Key? We could use any information available in our fight against it."

"So we have an agreement?" Mayra said. Mira nodded. "All right." She looked to Less and said, "He says a lot of things we already know; that it possesses and alien intelligence of its own, that it's capable of opening gates to Fairy, that it can possess its bearer, that it can grant great power, and that it is capable of seducing human beings."

He had to ask. "What does he say that you didn't already know?"

"He's mad and he's a prophet. He says a lot of things, most of which will lead you into serious trouble unless you know how to interpret what he says." Mayra pursed her lips. "He is a very dangerous man."

"I see," said Less. "Our kind must also walk the line between reality and fantasy. I understand how difficult it can be. Do you have a picture of the prophet? I'd like to see if our paths, or Imogen's, have crossed before."

"He has been with us for over two centuries," Mayra said. "I don't think you'd have met him."

Less was impressed. "Imogen has been around longer than that." He shrugged, feigning disinterest. "Well, if you are interested in us Fae trying to unravel the message in the madness, let us know."

"But I am no prophet," Imogen hastened to add, lest these women get some fool notion in their heads. She already didn't think much of holding another immortal like that, especially not for two centuries.

"I'll keep your offer in mind," Mayra told Less. "It is... interesting we both have immortals with us. All right," she said looking among the faces of the women present. "Some of our most talented people are already out looking for signs of the Key and working on blunting some of the damage it has done. But Sophie and Linna know the Ritual of Quietus better than most of us."

The two in question were a blonde with short hair, and an up-turned nose and a red-head with shoulder-length, curly hair and pretty freckles. She also wore thin-framed glasses. They looked pretty nervous to have been singled out as members of the new "exchange" program.

"What is the name of the woman you leave with me? I don't know sign language. Is she deaf?" Mayra wanted to know.

"Her name is Mira," Rey replied. "She's not deaf. She prefers not to speak. What are

your... members looking for when searching for the effects of the Key?"

"Some of us are trained to look where no one else looks, to see what no one else sees. It is in these places that lurk fae things. Since the Key was loosed, much larger areas have been taken by fae things. Our world is being devoured by Fairy; this is what the Key wants."

Rey nodded. "We've seen it too. We managed to figure out the pattern of what it was doing. If we don't stop it in less than three weeks, it'll be too late."

Many of the women looked around at each other nervously. Mayra asked, "Why do you say three weeks?"

"We analyzed the pattern of the Key's activities," Rey said, wondering if their prophet had said something to them about an event in three weeks time. "The culmination of the cycle is in three weeks time. Why?"

"Very well done," Mayra said. "That's essentially what the prophet tells us. We have three weeks to stop the Black Key or the Gates will be open forever."

"Does any of your teachings say how to free someone who has been possessed by the Key?" Rey asked.

Mayra nodded. "Once the Key is Quiesced it will relax its hold on the Key Bearer. If they can be saved, that is the time. It is not always possible, however. Some people want the power the Key grants and refuse to give it up. Others don't think they want it until they have it and the result is the same."

"And if they don't want to give it up?" Rey couldn't help but imagine the worst case scenario. Fighting Richard.

Mayra pursed her lips. "What do you think?"

Rey didn't reply. She had to believe that Richard would give up the Key. To think otherwise would be to lose the fight before it had even begun.

"What can we do in the meantime?" asked Less. "We have started the process of constructing an iron box. Do you know if it needs to be built to specific dimensions?"

Mayra looked pleased. "That is very helpful. You must be very certain the iron is cold-forged or it won't work. Steel is right out. The box would need to be big enough to accommodate something roughly six inches long by two wide. The key itself isn't more than a quarter inch thick. We have been unable to locate a sheet of cold-rolled iron from which to construct a new box. It all comes in steel these days."

"What happened to the old one?" Rey asked.

"It was taken the same time as the Key was," Mayra stated. "I imagine it was cast away or destroyed soon after."

Rey frowned. "I saw an iron box before," she said, then described the squished iron box she'd seen at the parking garage, but without mentioning it was destroyed. "Did the box you had look like that."

Mayra shook her head. "That doesn't sound like the right one, though it would have been similar."

"What else needs to be done to the box to make it work properly?" Rey asked. She wondered where Less had been able to find a sheet of cold rolled iron. Something he had hidden away in a cache somewhere?"

"I suppose it would need some kind of lock," said Less. The more devious the better. Rover would like that. Less was more concerned with how the Key was stolen in the first place. He made a mental note to inquire once the important business of the Key's cage was sorted out.

Mayra nodded. "What else is needed is that the Key be quiesced and then it must be somehow safely put inside the box. The cold iron should prevent it from influencing those around it, so long as the box's seals are very good."

Imogen spoke up. "That might be harder than it sounds. This Key can use any crack to influence others? Iron tends to rust. How will can it be preserved? Is that how the Key was freed?"

Mayra nodded again. "We believe so. The original box had certain things done to it, prayers and enchantments, to preserve the metal against ravages of time. But we think that even these things are not forever. Thus it was necessary to always pass down the rites to Quiesce the Black Key should it ever escape."

Less decided he would add a pair of cold-forged iron tongs to Rover's task list for picking up the Key. "Keeping the box in an oil bath would keep it from rusting. But speaking of cracks, how did they Key escape this time? We should prepare for that eventuality at least."

"I'm not certain," Mayra said. "My best theory is that the box degraded and it was able to influence one of the sisters here and seduce her into freeing it."

Imogen asked, "Where is she now?"

"Dead. The Key abandoned her as it does all its victims when it's finished with its game and wants to move on. We found her body in a ditch along the road to Mythic City. It probably took an unsuspecting motorist and road them into the city. Who knows how many people it's destroyed by now."

Less didn't feel the need to enumerate the deaths they knew about so far. "Can you tell us more about the Quietus ritual? Do we need to prepare ahead of time? How long does it take to perform?"

Mayra looked toward the two women she was sending with the group. The red-haired Linna spoke up. "It is like both a song and a prayer. As long as we sing it in the proper way, the Black Key should calm down and relax its hold on its Bearer."

Less nodded. "Well, we have about three weeks. We'll make sure to get the box made. Do we have any way of finding the Key before that? Mira is the only one I know who can actually detect the Key. If not, then Sophie and Linna would be safer here until we need them."

"Let us worry about locating the Key," Mayra said. "We'll call you."

"Mayra," interrupted Linna boldly, "listen. I think we need to work together with them. Our people are having trouble locating the Breaches and if the Prophet is right, that's just where the Key and the Bearer are most likely to be hiding."

"She's right," said the short blonde, Sophie. "And every day the Key is out there things will get worse. Three weeks is just the point of no return. You know what the Prophet said about the Breaches."

Mayra frowned at them, clearly unused to being questioned by her underlings.

Linna added, "The other priestesses are having trouble finding the Breaches. It's a process of elimination and it's slow. If these people can help with that we might be able to find the Key before three weeks is up -- before the entire city is forever swallowed by a Breach -- we must accept them. There are children that are disappearing every day. And mothers, fathers, brothers -- whole families and no one will ever find them or even remember they existed. Only the Ordu Morríghan will remember the ones taken by Faerie. We should be more than act as a memorial to those the world will forget, high priestess. We must accept help openly given. Millions of people depend on us."

Sophie said, "Don't forget the fairies."

Linna nodded. "Making everything more difficult are the fairies escaping through the breaches. Our priestesses can barely hold their own. How long before we no longer have the people to keep up the search?"

Mayra looked angry, but she couldn't fault the logic. "Very well. The situation is desperate." She looked to Less. "The lives of my priestesses will be in your hands, and so will the fate of everyone in Mythic City. Know that if you betray us, your friend's life will end along with all the rest of us. You say she can sense the Key. Well then it likely can sense her, too. You'll have to find another way to find the Black Key and when you do you

must have Linna or Sophie call us in. We'll bring Mira."

"We don't have three weeks either," Rey said, finally speaking again. "The longer it takes, the worse the breaches may get, and the more people who are getting hurt. We can't wait."

Linna nodded. "That's right. Since there is no way to close the Breaches, we have to try to minimize their impact."

Imogen said, "Wait. What? Are you saying these Breaches remain even if we capture the Black Key?"

Linna nodded. "This has happened before, in Ireland and Britain."

"You're saying those stories about fairies are all true?"

Linna nodded. "In time the stories diminished, but it has taken centuries for the ancient Breaches to fade, even though they were made thousands of years ago."

"It's going to make for an interesting Summer," said Less. He didn't like the inefficiency of having to call Mira in from Santa Fe once they had found the Key. It could be gone by the time she showed up. But the point seemed to be non-negotiable and he understood the concept of insurance.

"At least you won't have an army of sentient mice to evict from your home," Rey murmured in Glymjack Cant, then she continued in English. "How quickly can you mobilize once we've found the Key?"

"As far as our cars will take us," Mayra said. "We'll be ready."

Rey nodded, then walked over to Mira and hugged her tight. "If you ever don't feel safe here," she whispered in the motley's secret language, "you get out, understand? Don't let them hurt you."

Mira returned the hug. When she let go, she signed. "Don't worry about me. No one can hold me against my will. Besides, I'm curious about this 'prophet' of theirs who has apparently been held prisoner for centuries."

"Be careful," said Less. He watched, frozen, as the sisters gathered around Mira and gently drew her away. Mira looked back at her friends, but was soon gone from sight. The doors closed and the party was left with their new acquaintances.

Rey turned to look at Linna and Sophie. "I'm hoping we don't get into trouble, but do you have any experience in fighting, or self-defense?"

"Mayra requires all of us to take self-defense classes," Linna said. "I get by. But Sophie here

is a black belt in.. judo?"

Sophie smiled patiently. "Close enough. We can handle ourselves."

"That takes care of hand to hand combat," Rey asked, continuing her questions. "Do you have guns, other ranged weapons and the supernatural covered as well? Where we're going to look in the breaches is going to be dangerous."

Linna shook her head. "No guns. What do you mean by covering the supernatural, exactly? You mean aside from the ritual?"

"Where the breaches have occurred, the realms of Faerie have extended into ours," Rey replied. "It's a very dangerous place, and we may have to go into them to track down the Key. Do you have any abilities that will help protect you from whatever we might encounter in there or nearby? If not, there are things that can be done to help you, but it would require a certain level of trust on your part. The willingness to make a promise, and accept a tiny loan of my abilities, for a short time."

Linna and Sophie looked at each other and then Sophie said, "We've always been taught never to make deals with any fairies, and you seem to be part of that. As I said, we can handle ourselves."

"Very well," Rey said. "Our friend's safety relies upon yours, and I don't want her to end up getting hurt because of any misunderstandings about how much protection you'll need."

"Will you be taking your own car?" asked Less. "We have room for five but it will be tight."

"We can if you like," Linna said.

"Any of your fairies we meet will be less dangerous to us than the Black Key," Sophie told Rey. "You need to accept there is danger to all of us here and move on."

"Hey Less," Rey said in Glymjack Cant with a smile and pleasant voice as she turned her back on the women and moved toward her car.. "Do you think she's deliberately being a bitch, or does she think I'm an idiot?"

"*Like mother like daughter,*" signed Less. "*She is one of the chosen priestesses kept away from society for a noble cause. I'm sure she can't help it and you shouldn't take it personally.*" He opened the car door for Imogen. "Are we putting them up at your place or the Casino?" he asked Rey aloud.

"Not enough room at my place," Rey replied, "and I can't use work for this. We'll have to find somewhere else."

"The Hollows are out. It's too dangerous to go too near the Doors to the Hedge. Imogen's

cabin is a wreck and my place is crowded with just one person there. It will have to be Mira's place."

"I don't think so." Rey gave him a look. "It's her *home*, and not only does someone else live there too, I'm pretty sure she wouldn't want us taking strangers there. It'll have to be somewhere else, or the cars."

"Amber likes meeting new people and it's the safest place in town that I know of since Mira installed her wards," pointed out Less. "Do you have another suggestion because I'm not keen on having our only way of defeating the Key sleeping in their car."

Rey frowned. As much as she hated it, he was right. She didn't want to give the priestesses any more of Mira than they already had. Didn't want to let them know where Mira lived, and now not only would they know where she lived, but that there were wards on it. "Fine." Her tone was flat and emotionless.

"Mira can't have gone far," said Less as he pulled out his phone. "I'll let her know."

Mira answered after several rings and he heard some crackling before she said "Hello," in a voice so quiet it was difficult to hear her. She was clearly trying not to disturb her hosts.

Less was very relieved to hear her voice. He closed his eyes to imagine her face as he talked to her. "Mira, hi. I'm glad I could reach you. Look, we need a place to put up the two priestesses and I reckon your apartment is the safest place in Mythic for them. Do you mind?"

"Not at all," she assured him. "You'll need either the keys from Amber or the code on the door. Probably just using my code would be easiest, but do call Amber as well because she'll need to inform security who'll be coming to the apartment." She gave him Amber's number first and then when he was ready, she told him the code for the door. Remy had it installed because she kept losing keys. The code changed about once a month or so but that wouldn't happen again for a few weeks.

"Okay, thanks! I'll call Amber on the way." He put his notebook back into his breast pocket. "How are you doing in there? So far so good?"

She laughed gently, quietly. "Less, I've been here only minutes. Of course I'm fine." After a pause, she added, "Thank you. Take care of those two with you. With luck I'll be joining you all soon."

"Okay. See you soon." Less was glad to talk to her. He knew how things could radically change once the doors were closed. He nodded to Rey to let her know things were taken care of and got into the car to call Amber.

Amber's voice came through clearly after only the second ring. "Hello?"

"Hello Amber," said Less cheerfully. "I have great news!" His eyes glanced over to Rey in the driver's seat.

She was watching him, wondering what the hell he was up to.

"We have two young priestesses to help us fight the Black Key and Mira has graciously let them stay in her room. Could you let security know that Linna and Sophie will be staying in the building? I'm sure you guys will hit it off famously!"

"She did? Her room? Well, I guess that's all right then," Amber said. "I'm actually home now. Remy sleeps a lot. I guess his type does. Do you know when Mira's coming home? There's something really weird going on and I need to talk to her."

Less hoped it wouldn't be long but no sense getting Amber's hopes up. "It could be up to three weeks, but we're hoping we can wrap this up sooner."

"Oh. Well, I should tell you, then. There is something really, really wrong in Mythic. There are like, whole chunks of the city that have sort of... gone dark. There are things in there, living things. And most people don't even notice! Remy and his people have noticed it, too, and they are worried. I was thinking we noticed because of our link to Mira. But yet not a single other soul has noticed anything! They just... go around. I was just wondering if you have noticed or... ?"

"Yes, we have noticed," said Less. "That is what the priestesses are coming to help us stop. The Black Gates of Arcadia have been thrown open and the realm of Faerie is seeping into the city."

"So... okay yeah there's more. There is this place up in Mythic near where Mira and I used to work, you know, on the street." Less did know it. It was practically on his front doorstep where Mira, then called Mizuko, had taken over and managed a number of prostitutes on behalf of Rey. That was short-lived, however, and the operation broke up soon after. Amber continued. "Most people avoid alleys there anyway, but this was different. *Something* came out of there and chased me. Something like a man-wolf thing but with these vines all over them. He chased me all the way to Belle Park and then he stopped. I looked back and he was like... steaming and bubbling or something. It retreated and stopped boiling away then growled at me. Right there on the street in front of like a dozen people! But nobody even batted an eye. Well, they batted an eye I guess. But they reacted like he was just some punk, not a killer wolf-thing. They should have been screaming and running and weren't."

"I haven't told anyone that, yet. If Remy hears it, he'll put me under guard. He got really protective of me ever since the dragon grabbed me. He's such a sweetheart, but he'll go totally overboard if he hears about this and I really think the apartment is safest right now."

"Belle Park? That is interesting. I'll ask the Summer Warriors to have a look for the wolf-creature. Most people don't notice because faerie magic is hidden by the Glamour. If we

can't close the Black Gates then our realm will *become* Faerie and people will definitely notice then. We can't let that happen. Please get Linna and Sophie on the security list. We'll be there as soon as we can."

Less hung up. "Amber reports being chased by a Hedge beast near where your brothel used to be," he signed to Rey. "When she ran into Belle Park the creature couldn't follow. Do you think that's because it strayed too far from the gate it emerged from, or that Belle Park is protected in some way?"

"It wasn't a brothel," Rey signed in reply with a quick frown. "'It was a wolf-like creature? It might be a briarwolf. If it is, that's big trouble. What happened when it tried to follow her?"

"She mentioned the wolf-thing had vines. It started steaming, bubbling and boiling, but stopped when it retreated. Come to think about it, perhaps Amber has a protection spell on her person. She said Remy was being very protective of her. I should call Summer to get some warriors over there."

"The description does sound like a briarwolf." Rey shook her head. "It sounds to me like it may have reached the limit of the Hedge's effect . Most hedge-beasts cannot survive outside of the Hedge, so they will be confined to areas in and around the breaches."

"Yes, that would be my first choice as well. At least there is currently the opportunity to escape the Hedge beasts. I do not relish the thought of them having free run of the city, especially if the mortals are still blinded by the Mask." Less turned back to his phone to let the Summer Court know about the Briarwolf.

The Summer King was very busy but he took time out to speak with Winter. He told Less that the whole Duchy was just short of in a panic over the situation and that Veridia's fall had left Autumn without her guidance. He's been working with Spring to sift through problems they could deal with and half-hysterical accounts of people being taken into the Hedge Breaches. The only positive thing that has happened in the past couple days was that a known sympathizer, a loyalist changeling, got himself gored and trampled to death by a unicorn when he apparently tried to use a Breach to escape a couple of Jeremiah's enforcers.

He also shared concern that Autumn's leadership had been nearly eliminated. He showed awareness that the Paladin of Shadows was at least missing. With Veridia down, he expects Lydia to take control but apparently she doesn't have the kind of power over members of that court that Veridia had. Most changelings were afraid of Veridia and greatly respected her power, especially over sanity. Lydia, however, terrifies many courtiers so badly he's not so sure she'll be able to maintain any semblance of order, especially given the last remaining enforcer for Autumn is an assassin.

Less let his phone hand drop into his lap. He was stunned - the Duchy was really suffering from the Black Key's machinations. "Sounds like Summer is too busy to handle personal

requests. Veridia losing her crown has Duchy leadership in turmoil. He doesn't think Lydia will be supported as Queen. We'd better get these priestesses safely behind Mira's wards and see what we can do to find the Key."

"Someone needs to step forward, then," Rey signed. "Lead the Autumn Court until the crisis is past, and then beyond." She glanced at Less. "Someone with Winter's support would have a better chance at it."

Imogen didn't know what the changelings were saying to each other, but she heard half the phone conversation and read the look on Less's face. "Where is this duchy you mentioned on the phone?" she asked.

"Do you have someone in mind," asked Less of Rey, wondering what she was thinking.

To Imogen he explained, "The Duchy of Iron Mountain is basically the organization of the changelings in Mythic City."

Rey gave Less a "you have got to be kidding me, do I really have to spell it out" look.

Rey was always asking Less to spell out what he was thinking. "You have always placed your business interests far ahead of any political aspirations. I, of course, would support such a bid."

"I have no business interests outside of my job at the casino," Rey signed. "And my investments in the restaurant and gastropub. It's been that way for quite a while. Everything's above board. And the Autumn Court cannot be without strong leadership, especially now. And I do appreciate your support. If Veridia survives, she may not be capable of being Queen, and Lydia will undoubtedly want the throne. And it might get ugly."

Imogen scooted back to let them have their privacy and looked out a window.

"I'd expect nothing less," returned the Winter King. '*Of Autumn,*' he added silently to himself. "The Duchy will need a steady hand in the wheelhouse to avoid total chaos in the difficult times ahead. If these ruptures into Arcadia truly do not completely heal after we close the Gates, it will be a Brave New World indeed."

"We'll finish this later," Rey said aloud in English. "We need to focus on finding Ri- the Black Key."

When the group arrived at Mira's apartment, Linna and Sophie parked next to them and followed them into the lobby. Amber had done well in making sure security was aware of the temporary changes and they were able to ride the elevator up to the eleventh floor without issue.

"This way," Rey said and walked down the hallway in the direction of the apartment.

Less spent the rest of the trip constantly looking out the rear window to make sure the priestesses were still following them. He was paranoid that they would get separated somehow. He was enormously relieved when they pulled up in front of Mira's apartment building. He jumped out immediately to usher the two women inside using the security code, telling them that Rey would deal with parking their car properly once they were safely behind wards. They would need to go out patrolling the city for Hedge Breaches soon enough, but they had some planning to take care of before then.

Rey decided acting as a valet could be handled later. Getting started on the plans for how they were going to proceed with the search was more important, and Rey did not want to leave Less alone with them.

Less knocked on the apartment door, but when he tried the handle and it wasn't locked he walked in and invited the priestesses in. "Amber?" he called. "Your new roommates are here." He hoped the girl would distract them with a tour so he could get around to contacting Rover about cold forging.

Amber greeting them, waving them in. Imogen paused before stepping in, looking at the doorframe and apartment beyond. The moment passed, though and she stepped inside, too.

Amber said, "You must be Linna and Sophie. Welcome! And you are?" She was looking at Imogen.

"This is Imogen," offered Less. "Actually, she was a prisoner of the dragon as well. Now she's helping us with the problems in the city. Imogen, this is Amber. She is Mira's roommate and the reason we opposed the dragon in the first place." Less had registered Imogen's inspection of the doorway and suddenly realized the wards placed on the apartment should affect her. Did her human-but-immortal status give her a loophole here as well?

"Pleased to meet you," Imogen said.

Amber smiled and said, "I guess we had something in common at the time that the dragon liked."

Imogen gave Amber a shyly conspiratorial smile which Amber took to mean she had it exactly right.

"He must have had you in a separate chamber. He chained me up to this big stone pillar," Amber said. Now that the experience was a memory it seemed a lot less traumatic to her.

Imogen nodded. "I got the cage treatment. But you seem to be okay. It had to have been quite a shock."

Amber nodded. "But my friends rescued me before the dragon decided to have his dinner. I owe them all my life." Her thankful eyes looked to Rey and Less in turn before continuing. "And Mira nearly died saving me. If you are friends of theirs, you couldn't ask for any better."

Imogen nodded, then added conversationally, "I noticed there are some minor wards here designed to protect against magic used by a few, specific kinds of beings, which includes your friends here. Did you do that?"

Amber shook her head. "No. Mira had a friend come over and do it."

"I see."

"But how did you know? I mean, most people can't tell anything..." Amber looked at Imogen with a puzzled expression.

"I have a talent for such things. I'm sort of a witch, myself. There is nothing here that is meant to stop a witch, though, so I can only assume you and Mira are more worried about monsters and those touched by fae magic."

Amber blinked at her. "Uh... I guess?" She thought about it and nodded, "Yeah. We've had... break-ins. But never by a witch..."

Rey was pretty sure she knew why Mira had chosen the wards she had, but it made her curious about something else. "What else does she have warded." Permanent wards were expensive, and she really hoped Mira hadn't paid out so much that she owed too much in a moment of fear for her security and safety.

"Is it okay if I tell?" Imogen asked Amber. The two priestesses were watching curiously. But Amber gave it some thought and decided it might actually be a good thing for let be known, reasoning that if not everything is covered then it could be harmful to assume there was protection available for something that wasn't true. As a case in point, she had never thought about the place being vulnerable to the very magic that placed the wards to begin with. Amber nodded to Imogen.

"The wards are effective but they aren't foolproof. They are designed to suppress powers, not eliminate their use. But something about the magic used also helps obfuscate this place from those targeted groups that might try to track this place down. Also, the magic actually fortifies your home. Even a common thief might find your door lock several times more difficult to pick or bash down. What I see here is magic that suppresses all things fae or touched by the fae. That means magic, certainly. But should for example some person even touched by fae magic try to slap you, shoot you, or in any way hurt you at all, they would find their attempt blunted a great deal. In fact, an inexperienced aggressor like that might find themselves just as likely to hurt themselves as your or Mira.

"Similarly, you are defended against werewolf aggression. That includes not just powers

they wield -- which are often actually gifts from spirits and not their own -- but also aggressive thing they might attempt. I am very experienced with their kind so I can say with some authority that this ward potentially shields you from unwanted spirit activity as well. Or it might easily be extended to cover that. But I get the impression spirits aren't really what frightened Mira enough to pay for this ward."

Amber interjected, "How did you know Mira paid for these wards?"

"Because these wards are not temporary. Something had to be permanently sacrificed by the witch that cast these spells to keep them powered. Usually that means she had to sacrifice a part of her soul. No friend should ask that of another friend. It's too much. You do not ask your friends to sacrifice themselves for you; it's the other way around, and act of free will. You said Mira had a friend come and do it, not that a friend came here and gifted you with this. I have to assume this work carries a price."

Amber was beginning to think she shouldn't have let Imogen answer Rey's question. She sure Mira would have wanted her friends to know what she had to promise to get protection here.

"The third ward offers identical protection against the walking dead. Specifically vampires. This ward is the most interesting because of the three, this is the only one that has any exception made to it. I can't tell you who it was made to allow, but I can tell there is a hole in it that works for just one vampire."

Amber looked surprised. "But Mira said she never made any exceptions for anybody. There can't be a hole!"

Imogen shrugged. "There is."

"She hasn't allowed even those who are her friends! She says that anybody could get controlled by a third party and be made to do things against their will and that she wouldn't make an exception. She wouldn't have done that! Not without at least telling me!"

Imogen saw Amber was really upset about it. "I'm sorry, Amber. I can only tell you what I see. There *is* an exception. For whom, I can't tell."

Rey knew who it probably was, but she wasn't about to say who it was in front of the others. Nor was she going to try and comfort Amber, worried that the girl might accidentally let the name slip. And while she was disappointed that Mira wouldn't make exceptions even for members of her motley, she certainly could understand her reasoning why.

"There will be time to worry about vampires once our immediate problems with the Black Key is dealt with," said Less. "Linna and Sophie can get settled before we plan a search pattern for Hedge Breaches in the city. I need to touch base with Rover about the iron box

to contain the Key." With that, Less excused himself to call Rover. He passed on the new dimensions of the required box and that it needed a good lock. Perhaps even a hidden one if he had the time. He emphasized the fact that, as a cage for the Black Key, the workmanship had to be masterful - no cracks could be permitted. If he had to sacrifice on the deviousness of the lock in order to get the box done right in the time limit they had, so be it. He also added a request for cold-forged iron tongs, if possible, with which to handle the Key. If Rover needed anything, he was to call Less immediately.

Imogen's Story

I was born 357 years ago, July the 2nd, 1665 in Barbados as the child of an Irish woman, Ann Glover. We had been sent as slaves -- excuse me, indentured servants -- and she married a good Roman Catholic man who was also indentured. I remember him well enough; he was stubborn like my mother. He fought the British back in old Eire and he, like my mother, paid for it dearly. Cromwell had put them both on a boat along with thousands of other Irish and sent them all off to slavery in Barbados.

In my early life I was awakened to the realities of the spirit world by fellow slaves on the island. They were blacks from Africa. My mother disapproved of my spending time with them, so I had to sneak away in the evenings to learn more about this Otherworld of spirits and beings no one else seemed to know anything about.

My father died before I was 15. I needn't say much more than that; we were a poor family with nothing of our own. But the circumstance of his death enabled us to escape that servitude to find a new life in another British colony in Boston. Our fortunes did not improve very much.

My mother found work for us with the Puritan family of John Goodwin. They had five children, all of whom were mistrustful and suspicious because we were Roman Catholic and Irish. It was around this time I had become enthralled with the Otherworld, the world of spirits. I had already begun to make friends among them, friends that wanted to help and protect me.

When the Goodwin children accused me of stealing laundry (not true -- I was only looking at the fine material, not taking it for myself), my mother defended me. Despite her disapproval of my "witch ways", she stood up for me. Therefore, it was she that took the blame when the children fell ill and accused her of witchcraft.

The four of the five children had fallen sick. At the time, I didn't know what was happening. I thought that my spirit friends had wanted to protect me. Perhaps they thought that if they afflicted the children, they would stop harassing and teasing me. I was wrong. The spirits that afflicted them were as much my enemy as they were the enemies of all mankind.

In those days, an accusation of witchcraft was a deadly serious matter. Worse, the children's very real afflictions seemed proof. My mother was accused of witchcraft. Only then did she seem to really understand the danger she was in. She barely spoke English; she hated the English for what they did to Ireland. She refused to speak it even to defend herself. But they pressed her hard and before she was condemned as a witch, she had even named me as the real witch.

The court didn't believe her. They thought her mad and what she endured at trial certainly didn't help her sanity. Because she didn't speak English very well, though she understood it enough, she knew the Lord's Prayer only in Irish and a bit of Latin. But since she couldn't recite it in English her Puritan prosecutors were unimpressed.

While the court determined her guilt, I was taken by the authorities and held until such time they could determine if Ann Glover be a liar or not. I sent my familiar, a spirit cat to watch over her, but there was little I could do. She was driven through the town on a cart, people mocking her and throwing insults, but she was stubborn and defiant as always. After they hanged her, they threw her in a shallow, unmarked grave to rot. Her prediction before she died that the children's affliction would continue after she was killed because she was not the witch proved true.

I convinced my jailers of my innocence and they released me. I was forgotten by that town as I fled north to settle in Salem Town.

I did not know that the murders of innocents accused of witchcraft had only just begun. I'd been given an old Irish name by my mother, Inghean, which I updated to Imogen and changed my surname to Hubbard. I spoke English better than my mother, and I left my mother's Roman Catholic faith behind me. I found employment as a maid.

My mother had been hanged in 1688. I was 23 then and still unmarried. I had no dowry and no good family name to stand upon. I was not part of their congregation, either, and that made me a target of suspected immorality. It was a difficult time. I kept to myself mostly, and practiced what I had learned in Barbados.

In this time I also learned the nature of the evil that was determined to destroy the colony. Spirits of plague, fear, jealousy, and torture be growing upon the sadly fertile soil of Puritanism. I saw them gain strength over the years. By 1692, I realized something evil had taken root in the hearts and minds of the people of the county. Children fell ill and had visions. Use of witchcraft was proclaimed. Accusations flew and people died. I knew I was in great danger because I was the daughter of an accused and condemned witch. Were this found out, I would surely be put to jailed, tortured and put to death.

Still, I was less afraid for myself than I was for what would happen if this corruption was allowed to fester. So, night after night I worked late into the evening through the late winter of 1692 to consult with spirits friendly to me, despite how dangerous it was for me to do so. If these people ever caught me they would rightly label me as a witch. It had

been a witch in the eyes of my mother after all, and she was one who had loved me.

Through the spirits advice, I knew what I had to do to protect the people of Salem and drive away the evil that possessed them. I sweated for months and sought another solution, but the spirits knew only one way. If I was to protect the village, I must become better than I was. I must undergo a rite of purification.

Finally, I worked up the resolve to do what I must. With the aid of the spirits, I slipped into the jailhouse and freed one of the women accused there. I'll not tell you which one; it saddens me enough that I could only save one of those condemned to execution. My consolation was that what I would do might save many more in the future, perhaps save the entire county from being completely swallowed by the evil from the dark world of Shadow that had set eyes upon this vulnerable and fearful land. I took her identity and my spirit friends showed her escape upon her oath she would tell no one what occurred, and that she could never use her birth name again.

The ruse worked. With the spirits' help my disguise was very good. I was questioned in her place. Tortured until I thought I would tell them anything to make it stop. I rotted in jail for weeks until they came to hang me in August of 1692 along with seven others. I cursed the spirits for making me do this, for putting me through it. I cursed the townsfolk their fearful ignorance, even though I knew it be not their fault. I was afraid and I did not want to die.

But die I did. They hanged me from that tree in Salem Town and threw my body into a two foot shallow grave to rot. Just like my mother only four years before in Boston.

Despite my curses and pain and anger I threw at them, the spirit friends I made were true to their word. Upon my death, my soul used the connection I had to them to make my way back from the Underworld and into the world of Shadows. I was gathered up by the spirits as they had promised me. Several of them joined with my soul, adding their strength to mine own and changing me forever.

Dying was difficult, but returning from death was worse. It was weeks before I had pulled my mind together again. Months more before I was able to rebuild my body in my sanctum, a place I had prepared before I entered into this final adventure. It takes great strength and power to rebuild a body from a lock of hair, and the strength I gathered had to be done carefully, out of sight of the foul spirits that plagued the county. And I was new at this, weak. This be why it took me so long.

When my body was at last rebuilt and resting in my secret place, I then had to restore it to life. Months more passed before I rose again, Purified by pain and death. And stronger than I was. Much stronger.

I battled the evil that plagued the county through the winter of 1693. As I drove away or destroyed the evil shadows, the executions and accusations slowed, finally ending by summer.

I didn't do it alone. I had more than spirits as my allies. But that is a story for another time.

By summer of 1693, my the worst of the spirits were defeated or driven away. I never let the people of Salem see me. They never knew the battle I fought in the world of spirits, but the results were that people eventually saw they had done wrong and felt shame for it. The killings slowed and stopped. The things that reveled in the evil that men did were gone and so was their influence. Peace came to Salem, though the wounds of that terrible time would remain for centuries.

I went further west, sometimes settling among sturdy frontiers folk, sometimes with the native folk. I never stayed anywhere for long, for as years passed I would be seen never aging. Through my ordeal and sacrifice I had become immortal and separate from the people I should have been a part of. I cannot age. Though my body may be killed, I will always return. I could not live as a mortal any longer, so I did what I could to protect all people from influence of evil spirits.

The Black Key

Less was able to get through to Rover and give him details. Rover then asked, "Does this thing every need to be opened again after it's closed? Because I could make a very simple but effective mechanism that would keep the box shut once you close the lid and never open again, short of someone using a cutting torch."

Less looked away from his phone for a moment. He took in all the occupants of the apartment and looked out the window over the city. "No," he said into the phone. "The box never needs to be opened ever again."

"Then I'll get working on it. Ready for pickup by next week," Rover informed him. "At my shop." His mind was already running over where to get the cold iron, how to work it, and then how to verify how pure the iron was when they disconnected.

Amber had taken Linna and Sophie upstairs to show them Mira's room, bathroom, and to inform them the hot tub was strictly off limits.

Imogen turned in place from her spot just past the short hall from the entry. "Wow. I guess Mira and Amber do pretty well."

"Well enough," Rey replied. "A friend of Mira's owns the apartment and is letting them live here."

"Do you think you might coordinate your efforts to find the Key with Mayra's people? With that many eyes out there, you might piece something together you might not on your

own," Imogen suggested. "It sounds like it would be in our interest to catch the Key before three weeks is up."

Less slipped his phone back into his pocket and rejoined the group. "I trust the priestesses can telephone the mission to get updates on whatever visions their prophet has. And Mira can contact us if she finds anything out. I'll update our maps with the information I'm receiving on new breaches and we can start visiting them one by one."

"I think we might want to start with the breaches close to home," Rey suggested. "Like Richard's apartment. Places Richard knows, and that the Key might use to hide."

"That makes a lot of sense," said Less. "Sissy has told me she would like in on the next attempt to capture the Key. Should I bring her in on our search, or wait until we find Richard?"

"You prepared to listen and deal with her sniping, smartass comments and threats?" Rey asked.

"I don't tend to listen to or deal with much of what she says, but she is a powerful fighter. That is something we may need."

Rey thought for a moment about what she knew of Sissy. Before she was made Ghul, Sissy was idle and that made her dangerous. She used people to better her social standing at court, stepping on whoever she could. Once she was Ghul, though, Veridia kept her busy, and while Sissy still had a reputation at court as someone not to spar with verbally or socially, she'd had little or no time for her old antics. A bored and idle Ghul, Rey acknowledged silently, was a dangerous one.

"We probably ought to put her skills to use, then," Rey said aloud. "It will help keep her mind off Veridia's condition."

"Where to first, then? Richard's apartment? What do we do if we find him? The box for the Key won't be ready until next week."

"We wait and watch," Rey replied. "But do not approach. We can't afford another confrontation, or risk the Key jumping to a new Bearer. We need to find out what other requirements the priestesses need to perform the ritual. Any special equipment, or if the Bearer will need to be restrained or otherwise incapacitated before or during the ritual."

"They said all they need to do is sing the prayer to quieten the Key. They don't need any equipment but the Bearer will have to be prevented from killing the priestesses while they sing until the ritual takes effect."

Imogen said, "I might be able to help with that. I'm very good with wards. I might be able to trap him, slow him down or at least protect us from him, provided we can choose the place we will encounter him."

"I'd still like to double check with the priestesses just to be safe," Rey said. "And I'm sure we can lure the Key out and to where we want him to be. If the Key knows what Richard knows, then I suspect he might not be able to resist the temptation to hurt me."

"That means we need to be very careful to avoid detection as we test each breach for the Key's presence," said Less. This was something he knew a fair amount about. "In which case it might be best to keep the priestesses here and each of us, including Sissy, scout stealthily alone and gather information from indirect sources. We could meet at the end of each day to report, maintaining a way to alert each other in case of emergency."

Imogen was worried about something. "Rey, are you saying Richard and you are enemies?"

"Quite the opposite," Rey said. "We're lovers, bound as close as we can be without marriage, pledge or vow. The Key almost killed my sister, whom I'd asked to help us. She's now blind, and likely will never speak to me again. Richard knew who Marie was, what she meant to me. It would be a perfect opportunity to remove a threat, and cause an incredible amount of pain and anguish."

Imogen was still puzzled. "I'm not sure I follow. Why would Richard, even as the Bearer, consider you a threat? He loves you. Maybe I've got it wrong, but it sounds like this Key works by seducing people into taking its power. In my experience, a person falls to corruption when presented with something they really wanted. It would be easier for the Key simply to give Richard what he really wanted most, deep in his heart rather than to force him to do things his very heart and soul would rebel against."

"This is my opinion, but I sincerely doubt the Key really considers you or Less or me as any threat at all. Maybe Mira, if she is in fact the one person on the planet it could not seduce and control, and certainly those two priestesses. The rest of us probably don't even factor into its plans except as diversions it finds along the way."

"Which is why Richard attacked Veridia," continued Less. "She also knew the ritual. By extension, Lydia could also be considered a threat."

"That might not be the only reason Richard attacked Veridia," Rey said with a slow smile, so knowledgeable and wicked that it would disturb anyone who knew her. "Richard hates vampires. He'd wipe every single one of them off the face of the earth if he could. Veridia looks very much like a vampire when she hasn't strengthened her Mask. And I know where I might find a vampire or two who would be willing to help out."

To Less, she signed "Don't say any names aloud. I'm certain Remy has rivals he'd like to be rid of. We get our bait, and Remy owes us a favor."

Less nodded slowly. Getting vampires involved in this was an added complication, but it did cut straight to one of Richard's core motivations. He only wished he could have tracked down Xavier by now. "You find us a bait vampire, and I'll check on Lydia. We can

meet back here tomorrow to compare notes."

"Or sooner," Rey added, "if we learn of anything really important."

"Until then," said Less. Amber and the priestesses were coming back down and Less felt that this moment should be documented. He held up his camera-phone. "Girls. A photo of the new roommates, if you don't mind?"

He managed to catch a candid shot of them exiting the staircase. Linna laughed. "It's not like we're really moving in."

Sophie was more cautious. She was well aware that aside from showing cooperation, they were also hostages, a guarantee against Mira's good treatment. If Less and his friends wanted to keep them there, they pretty much had to stay.

Rey glanced at Less. Was he going to try and mess with their dreams? She hoped not - at least not until after they'd managed to capture and subdue the Key.

Amber asked, "I know you said she would be around for up to three weeks, but where is Mira? Can I see her? I really wanted to talk to her about... stuff."

"You can always phone her." Less beckoned Rey and Imogen over. "How about a group photo? This marks the real beginning of the hunt for the Black Key. It should be remembered." He handed the phone to Amber. "Would you mind taking it, Amber?"

Rey shook her head. "No thanks," she said. "Not interested."

Amber took the phone and got a shot of Less standing between Linna (who smiled) and Sophie (who didn't).

"Got it," Amber said, putting the phone in her pocket. "Why can't I just see Mira?"

"Because she is being kept safe from the Black Key. The Key has some affect over her and can probably detect her presence. Since the Key can take control of people, she needs to be kept isolated for when we do find the Key." He held out his hand for his phone.

Amber removed the phone from her pocket and took another picture of Less. "But I don't have the Key. Why can't I see her?"

Rey waited to see what Less would say next. He was acting.... odd. And it made her wonder what he was up to.

"The problem is that nobody can tell if the Key is secretly possessing you. Its better if her location is kept secret for now. But give her a call, she might be able to invite you for a visit."

To Amber, the disappointment was crushing. "She's going to be in trouble if she hasn't found it already," she stated with certainty. "She doesn't know how to avoid trouble, never has. I should have been there." She flopped down into an overstuffed chair to mope.

Linna watched the teenager's antics with amusement while Sophie looked bored.

Rey bit back an exasperated sigh, and moved to stand in front of Amber. She bent her knees slightly, putting herself at the girl's eye level. "Amber, I need your help. Do you or Mira have a computer?"

"Nope," she said. She lifted the phone in her hand. "But this has access to the internet."

Rey's phone rang. She looked at the display and frowned at the "Unknown" label for the caller. "I need you to search the local paper's site and make a list of any and all accidents and violence in and around Santa Fe in the past 72 hours," she said. "Now excuse me, I have to take this." She straightened up and headed for the sliding door to the balcony as she thumbed the screen of her phone to answer the call.

Amber made a frustrated noise but got to work on Less's phone. She was actually surprisingly thorough on things like this, but then she had an aptitude for anything that might help her steal something later.

"Hello?" Rey said, wondering who it might be.

"Witch Lafitte. The Queen is gone," said Lydia's dry, raspy voice. A chill shivered down Rey's spine. "Our court's fate will be decided in one hour's time at Veridia's shop. Please be there."

The news, though expected, made Rey speechless for a moment. "Understood," she replied, and disconnected the call as she slid her phone back into her pocket. She turned and headed straight for the door. "Veridia is no longer the Autumn Queen, and I have been summoned," she quickly said aloud to Less in their motley's secret language, then continued in English. "I have to go. I'll get in contact with you as soon as I can."

Amber jumped up. "Wait! What about Mira?"

Rey turned and continued walking backward toward the door. "Mira's safe, in a place warded like this one, working with Sophie and Linna's friends the same way Sophie and Linna are working with us. We'll be calling her tomorrow, and I'm sure you'll be able to talk to her then." A look of regret quickly crossed her face. "I'm sorry, Amber, but I really have to go. Mira would understand, and I really hope you will too." She hated pulling that card, but she had no choice. There was no way she was going to say anything about Autumn being without a leader in front of the priestesses.

Less waved sadly goodbye to Rey as she left. His own crown felt heavy on his head. He knew abstractly that Summer and Spring would be jumping into action to secure some of

Autumn's power in the Duchy but he didn't have the energy for political games. Change was good - it kept the Keepers one step behind - but he would let Storm and Ishtar fight it out and simply give Autumn as much support as they needed. Any help he gave to the smooth running of the Duchy would mean an orderly transition to Winter.

The worst part of all this was that it interrupted his plans to check on Lydia's safety from the Key. He certainly wasn't invited to this gathering but he worried that a gathering of Autumn might attract the Key. They would not be thinking very clearly. He decided he would phone Sissy to warn her to keep her eyes open.

"Amber, when you're done with my phone I would appreciate it back. I am somewhat lost without it, and I need to call someone."

"Oh sorry," Amber said. She gave it back to him so he could make the call.

He got through to Autumn's Ghul momentarily. She sounded like either she had a cold or had been crying. She listened to what Less had to say, but said that she wasn't aware Autumn was gathering at all, that everyone was scattered and hard to get hold of. She didn't know where even Lydia was after she announced Veridia was gone.

"This has never happened before," Sissy told Less. It wasn't exactly true. There had been other Queens of Autumn stretching back a long time, but it was true that Veridia had been queen for as long as Sissy had been here. To her, there had only ever been one Queen.

Less' paranoid danger-sense jangled electrically through his entire body. "Sissy, listen! Rey just got a call to say that Autumn no longer had a queen and she was summoned away. If you don't know anything about this, then why was Rey summoned? Maybe there is just some backroom political deal going on, but Richard is Autumn court so I'm worried that the Black Key is using his knowledge to trap Rey. What do you think?"

"I think Richard doesn't need to worry about us," Sissy said.

"Yes, so everyone keeps saying," he replied. "You should keep an eye on Lydia, though. If she has her mother's diary with the Quietus ritual then Richard does need to worry about her."

Sissy replied with, "I'll try."

After Less hung up, Sophie said, "So the fairy queen is dead and the Black Key is working to annihilate the rest of you?"

"Essentially," he said distractedly as he dialled Rey's number. He needed to make sure she was careful, or at least find out where she was going, but his call went directly to voice mail.

The Autumn Crown

When Rey arrived at the shop, she found the door open. The place was empty save for the spidery Lydia who watched Rey with black eyes. She looked the same as always. Lydia Fear seemed ready for business as usual, her arachnid arms folded around her.

"Good. You're here," she told Rey. "I have a proposal. You will say yes or no and you will make a pledge or not. There will be no bargaining, no haggling. Autumn requires a firm answer, an immediate answer."

Lydia drifted smoothly closer, her voluminous black gown hiding whatever she used for legs. "The crown has made it's choice. Autumn selects me. I do not want it. If I refuse it, I believe the Crown will pass to you. But you should know, that even I am not the first choice of Autumn, nor even the second. We will discuss that later, and what it means. For now you need to know that I wish to refuse the crown, but I will do it only when Autumn's future is guaranteed. I need a guarantee from you."

"Why don't you want it?" Rey asked. She had her suspicions, but she wanted to hear what Lydia had to say.

"Being Queen of Autumn means having no peace, no rest. Your responsibility will end only with your death. The Crown has brought tragedy to my family twice. Now I am alone. I would have peace."

"And what is the guarantee you want?"

"Three things. Like Spring and Winter, you will not rule in a vacuum, so first you must form a Council that includes me and two people of my choosing as well as two people of your choosing. Second, the Council must approve any official appointment to office you make. Third, the Council must approve any Duchy-wide and Court-wide decisions you make as Queen. Pledge that this will be so as long as you reign and the crown is yours."

Rey thought for a moment. "Why do you want these things?"

"You are inexperienced. You will need my help to keep this Court together. I will help you to make wise choices, but in the end the responsibility for acting and for leading will be yours. The Council will not meddle in every little detail. No one wants that. I only want to be sure that mistakes of the past -- mistakes my sister made -- will not be repeated."

Rey nodded. "I want our Court to be strong and whole, not divided and weak. Do you have the wording of the pledge, or am I to fashion it?"

"It is your pledge to make," Lydia said.

Rey thought for a moment, and then nodded, more to herself than to Lydia. "I agree to your requests, and should I fail to carry them out, I forfeit the Crown."

A wash of Wyrd left Rey tingling and a little weak. But then a new sensation came over her like a cool, dry breeze.

Lydia smiled, then did Rey the honor of a graceful acknowledgement of Rey's new status. "We should act quickly to fill the Council seats. Without it, no major decisions can be made. First, that matter I mentioned earlier.

"You may be unaware who is really the most powerful members of Autumn because it is in their nature to stand behind those with the talent and promise to lead. The Muses of Autumn are very strong. You would do well to listen to their advice, should they deign to give it. But be wary they do not use you to fuel their own... games. There are two you should keep in mind. The most powerful is Judd Gourlay. He is also Autumn's greatest, hidden weapon, should you be able to convince him to act on your behalf. His true power rivals Ishtar. Ishtar believes there is no changeling in the Duchy that could rival her power and makes herself like a goddess. She is wrong. Autumn does not fear any Court.

"I will be selecting Judd as one of my choices for the Council."

"I will be selecting Mira as one of my choices," Rey said. "Her voice is one our Court needs."

"And you can select her for whatever other office you wish," Lydia said. She probably referred to that of Legate. "It would require only the approval of the Council to bestow it. My sister may have been wrong to abuse her influence with the nymph, but she was not wrong in her choice for the position. For my second choice, I choose Natalie Richman."

"Will you tell me a bit about her?" Rey asked politely.

"She's a snowskin elemental. Well versed in certain skills useful to Autumn. She never lets politics or personal preference influence her thinking."

As Lydia spoke, Rey's mind was hard at work. The council needed to have input on the arts of war, and the physical defenses of the Duchy. Rey could not name Richard, not now, not when the future was so uncertain and she didn't even know if Richard would ever be the same if he survived the Key. Who did she know who might support her?

Drake's face immediately sprang to mind. He wasn't a member of Autumn, but there was no reason the council had to be made up solely of members of the Ashen Court. He would be able to provide information and advice, and an incentive for Summer to see the new political landscape was supported.

"My second choice is Drake Mari," Rey said.

Lydia stared at Rey as she tried to think who that was. When she finally remembered, she

was a surprised. "A Summer courtier? That is an interesting choice."

Lydia collected her thoughts for a moment before she moved on to the next order of business. "Although this is Spring's time to reign, it has always fallen to Autumn to deal with matters of the Hedge and of Keepers. We should convene the Council and the Queen in order to find a new solution regarding the matter of the Black Key and the Breaches it has made throughout the city."

Rey nodded. "It may be difficult to have Mira present in person," she said. "She is currently working with some allies of the moment on this, but we might be able to have her participate by phone."

"That will do, I think," Lydia said with a nod. "Then by your leave, majesty, I will notify my new Black Council members of their appointments and take care of some remaining matters. You may find evenings after nine easiest to arrange to convene the Council." She also placed a card in Rey's hand. "A direct line to me."

"One last thing before you go," Rey said. "How were the expenses of the Court funded when Veridia was on the throne?"

"She took care of it. You'll come to find that each court handles this in a different way. Winter essentially passes a hat. Spring found investments and diverts funds from certain of Ishtar's contracts. Storm owns a substantial amount of real estate and provides homes for many of his Court members -- the rent they owe goes to equip Summer warriors and fund court expenses."

"Then I'd best decide what I'm going to do," Rey replied with a slight smile. "I appreciate your answering my questions, and I undoubtedly will have others." She glanced at her watch. "Will 11:30 tonight be too soon for the meeting?" She hoped Drake would be available, and she was pretty sure Mira wasn't going anywhere any time soon.

"It's fine with me. It depends on the availability of the rest of the council."

Out in her car, Rey quickly dialed Mira's cell phone number, hoping she'd be able to get a hold of her friend.

It rang five times before Mira picked up. "Hello Rey."

"Queen Veridia is dead. Long live Queen Lafitte," Rey replied with an attempt at solemnity, but unable to keep the smile from her face.

"So. Autumn has a new Queen," Mira said. She felt a little unsteady. This happened much sooner than she expected. Something had changed and made her stomach seize. After a

moment to catch her breath, she said, "Congratulations, my Queen. I'm glad that Autumn has seen reason and chosen the correct person for the job."

"Don't congratulate me quite yet," Rey said. "I am forming a council, and would like you to be on it."

There was a dead space over the phone while Mira processed. This, too, was unforeseen. She had peeked into the short term futures of certain people, but she never looked into her own. "I... I'm honored. What will the council do?"

Rey quickly recounted Lydia's proposal, and their discussion about the council, its duties, and who the members were proposed to be. "I had been planning on creating a council of advisors anyway, but at the same time, while I might not like the restrictions, I need Lydia's support, at least for a while, or our Court will likely fracture and we could lose everything."

"You can count on me. I realize this is a huge responsibility but with the crown upon your head, it's the least I can do to try to help," Mira said.

"I really appreciate it," Rey replied. "I would also like you to consider taking up the mantle of Legate, should we all survive the Black Key and the rest of the Black Council agrees."

"I would do it for you... Queen Lafitte." Rey could hear the smile in Mira's voice.

"I don't know if I'll ever get used to hearing that," Rey said. "A meeting of the Black Council is hopefully going to happen at 11:30 tonight, to discuss what can be done about the Black Key and the breaches. If you can't be there in person, maybe you can call in and participate via phone. My cell phone has speakerphone capability."

"Let me know where you'll meet and I'll see what I can do. I'll either be there or I'll call in."

"I will." Rey paused for a moment. "How do you think Less will take the news of my becoming Queen?"

"You have just made our motley the most influential motley in the duchy. I should think he will be pleased. It will be a strong advantage if you can get along. It will be a crippling weakness if you do not," Mira said. "Listen, Rey. You have to try to be more patient. You are heading toward a confrontation that's personal and you can't afford to have personal issues anymore. You are Queen."

"A confrontation with whom? Less?" Rey shook her head, even though she knew her friend couldn't see it. "I am not angry with him, and I am aware of my weaknesses and failures." She sighed. "I wish you'd have more faith in me. It's rather disheartening to think my friends are afraid I'm going to flip out at the drop of a hat because of my temper."

Mira laughed quietly. "Rey, I love you. But that's kind of what it means to have a temper."

"That may be," Rey said, "but sometimes it's like you guys are walking on eggshells around me, like I'm going to get violent and gut someone if I get angry. I can control myself you know."

"I know. It's not like that," Mira said. "You are a friend and I know you wouldn't hurt anyone in the motley like that. But because you are a friend, I know it is uncomfortable or upsetting to think you might be angry. I know you haven't been angry with me. I have seen you angry with Less. Not that he didn't deserve it! I'm not saying that. I just wanted to remind you that whatever he did, he didn't do to hurt anyone purposely. And more importantly, if you still harbor feelings about it, you must set them aside. The motley must be seen by all to be unified and strong because I guarantee someone out there is going to try to take advantage of any crack they find. Having a King and a Queen in the same motley is unprecedented here. People will be afraid of your and Less's power." Mira paused. "I think that's my first bit of advice to the Queen as a councillor."

Rey couldn't hold back a laugh. "Oh, I've been angry with you, Mira, and more than once, and in your presence too. It's just certain things can make it more difficult to keep my mouth in check. And I do appreciate your advice. I need to have other points of view, other concerns, brought to my attention."

"Have you decided where the new Council will meet?"

"Ideally, in Iron Mountain, but tonight, it will have to be somewhere a bit more secure," Rey replied. "We need the majority of the council to be present for the meeting as well. I have some time to think about it and come up with a place."

"You might actually consider Corazon's. He could close off a party room for your use."

"That's a great idea," Rey said, "and it is neutral ground. I'll call Lydia as soon as I talk to Drake. I wonder what he'll think of the invitation."

"Drake?" Mira said, startled. "That went right past me when you said it. That's a really amazing piece of politics, not that I'm a great judge. And um... well obviously that's pretty interesting to me. I'll be very interested to hear his answer to your invitation and how he reacts to Autumn."

"So am I. He's next on my list of phone calls to make. I'll call Alexei and see if he can rent us that room."

"It seems I have an audience, Queen Lafitte," Mira said. "I'll be in touch."

"Later," Rey said, and hung up. She dialled Drake's phone number, glad she'd put it in her phone.

He sounded surprised to hear from her, and was glad there wasn't a new emergency. She assured him there wasn't, though it was a business call. When she informed him of Veridia's death and her own elevation to Queen, and that he was likely one of the first people outside of Autumn who knew this, there was almost complete silence on Drake's end.

He carefully wished her congratulations, then asked why she had called to tell him this. She explained she was setting up a Black Council, and was inviting him to become a member of it. Drake pointed out he was not a member of Autumn, and Rey replied she was aware of that. She went on to explain that she believed they'd worked well together in the past, and that she felt his expertise and knowledge, as a Summer warrior, would be useful. She also mentioned that Lydia Fear and Mira would be on the Black Council.

Mira's name got his attention, and he asked more questions about what the council would do. Rey answered them, and added that should he choose to accept, she ask that he promise not to discuss anything the council discussed, especially about the Autumn Court, with anyone but members of the Council and herself.

After a moments' thought, he asked if he could choose to resign from the council at any point, and Rey assured him he could, though she would expect him to honor his promise. He accepted Rey's offer and made his promise. Rey then told him the Council was trying to gather that night, to discuss the situation with the Black Key and what might be done, but that Mira might have to call in. He replied that he would be available, just to let him know when and where.

Rey sighed, pleased that both Mira and Drake had accepted their positions on the Council. Now she had to arrange for a place to meet. A quick glance at her watch told her Alexei was probably in his office at the club by now, so she dialled the number Alexei had given her for the office, where he spent most of his time.

Alexei answered on the third ring, delighted she was calling, though the emotion changed once she told him about her new "rank", and asking if she might rent one of the party rooms tonight. He turned all business, congratulating her and asked for assurances that the Duchy wasn't intending to try and absorb Santa Fe, as the changelings there enjoyed their independence. She promised him the reason she wanted to rent the room was to have a private and neutral place to meet with few potential ears to listen in on her meeting with her newly formed Black Council.

That seemed to satisfy him, and told her to consider the room booked for the entire evening. Rey told him she'd try to be there early, and give him a swipe of her credit card to cover the cost of the room and anything she and her guests might order - and if they didn't order enough, she would pay for the use of the room.

Having secured a room for the meeting, Rey called Lydia at the new number she had been given. Lydia answered quickly.

"Magister," Rey said, not really knowing what else to call Lydia. "I have secured a meeting place for tonight. The club known as Corazon, in Santa Fe."

"Still at 11:30?"

"Yes," Rey replied. Keeping the meeting at that time would give Rey time to eat and relax a bit before the meeting, and deal with whatever last minute things came up.

"I'll be there."

(Assuming Rey returns to Mira's apartment, the tag is returned here. It will have taken about 2 hours. It's in the afternoon of the same day.)

About two hours after Rey left, the phone rang at Mira's apartment with the ringtone indicating it was the security desk.

Amber picked up and then arranged for security to send Rey up. After a couple of minutes, there was a knock on the door, and at Amber's invitation, she walked in. There was something different about her, and it was rather obvious to those who could see her fae mien. Above her head hovered a crown of thorns, dark brown with the weight of Autumn, with small, dead-white bones tangled within them, like some small hedge beast or fey had gotten caught up in them and died. It seemed to flicker a bit, as if passing through random patches of sunlight and shadow.

Less managed to pull his attention away from his phone. He had been working his Bleak Seal network, getting as many agents that weren't deep undercover to keep an eye out for Richard and the Hedge Breaches. He was updating a well-folded bus map of Mythic that Amber had provided with the information that was dribbling in. He paused when he saw Rey's crown, blinked, and stood up to give her a formal nod. "Your majesty," he said, friendly.

Rey returned the nod. "Your majesty," she said with a little smile, then she looked at Amber. "I spoke with Mira about half an hour ago. She's doing well, though busy."

"Yeah?" Amber was distracted, staring at the hovering thing above Rey's head. "I didn't know you were a princess!" she finally exclaimed. "You're queen now? So Veridia was like your mother then?"

The Autumn Queen gave a short laugh. "No. My parents died long ago, may their souls rot in hell for all eternity." For such a vicious and horrible thing to say, Rey's voice was remarkably calm and collected. "Autumn's crown passed to me when Veridia died." Her voice then softened, and a smile caressed her face. "And close your mouth, Amber, before any flies decide to investigate," she said teasing the girl, and shifted her gaze to Linna and

Sophie, curious to see their reaction.

Amber blinked and looked embarrassed.

"How are we doing with the research," Rey asked, looking at the map.

Less's network was very good and it was getting better information than Amber was able to get from cruising the internet with Less's phone. His people were able to identify five major Breaches, ones that enveloped entire city blocks. His people noted that small ones were possible and even likely, but very hard to find without hundreds of people combing the entire city.

The closest one to Iron Mountain was the Breach involving the school and the second closest was one off an alley near Belle Park. This one was considered one of the most dangerous, even though it was the smallest of the large-scale Breaches, because it is near the enough tot he railway station that a lot of people could stumble into it, or get attacked by things coming out of it. There were already reports of Chase, who had been confirmed to be living nearby, engaging Hedge creatures on more than one occasion.

Richard Muldrow had been spotted heading into the Blood Tears club. It's currently being monitored.

Oh crap, Rey thought. "He might be going after Aurra and the other witches," she said aloud instead.

"Or the vampires," Amber pointed out.

"Oh, bad, bad, bad..." Rey got her phone out and immediately dialed Remy's phone number. It was too early for him to be up and about, so she left a message for him on his voice mail. Her voice was soft, and she spoke quickly in French. When she was finished, she turned back to look at Sophie and Linna.

"Can the Key track someone they have encountered before, someone they harmed through magic?" she asked the two women, hoping the answer was no but fearing the answer was yes.

They looked at each other. Sophie said, "We don't know."

"Can you tell us what you do know about the Key?" Rey asked politely. The more they knew, the better they might be able to come up with potential plans and solutions for dealing with the Key.

Linna nodded. "Our order kept a lot of records gained from research performed by high priestesses centuries ago, and from accounts during the time the Black Key was last active thousands of years ago. Unfortunately, when Oliver Cromwell invaded Ireland he mistook our order for a nunnery. He destroyed it and most of our research when with it. Then, like

many thousands of others, our ancestors were shipped off to the Caribbean to virtual slavery. It was a matter of a lot of luck that our order was able to survive at all."

Imogen, who'd been comfortably and quietly relaxing out of the way on the couch, nodded in silent affirmation.

"But the high priestess back in the day was able to preserve a few things by secreting them away before our holdings were destroyed by Cromwell. It was over a hundred years later, after the American Revolution, that they were able to recover some of what was lost and continue the order's purpose.

"What we do know for sure is that the Black Key controls something called the Gates of Arcadia. We don't know if this is an actual gate or more like a... set of circumstances that the Key manipulates and brings into alignment.

"We know the Key is sentient in its own way. Not exactly alive, but not inanimate either. The Key's existence is God's will. The Key was sent to test us. If we fail, then the world will be remade. Only this time it will be born from an apocalypse different than any flood ever known. The old stories suggest that having failed our God, mankind will be enslaved to the devils from under the hills, the Fae Lords."

"What more can you tell us about the ritual?" Rey hoped they could volunteer more, but had some questions if they didn't.

"It's a song that exploits the only known weakness the Black Key has," Linna said.

"Does it need to be able to hear it for it to work?" She was thinking about ways to subdue Richard, the Black Key, that would incapacitate him yet still have it able to hear the ritual.

"Yes."

"How long does it take to perform it?" Knowing a hard deadline might make planning easier.

Linna looked confused by the question, so Sophie answered it. "We don't have to end the song. We can keep it up as long as our voices don't give out and it should start working soon after we begin. So long as we don't miss a single syllable, it should have the effect of calming the Black Key enough to get hold of it."

"And you know what it looks like, right?"

"From descriptions, only. But it won't matter," Sophie said. "It looks like whatever the Bearer or prospective Bearer finds appealing."

"Imogen, will you come out onto the balcony for a second?" Rey asked. "I'd like to show you something."

"Okay." She followed Rey out and watched as Rey closed the glass door behind them.

"Are you afraid of heights?" Rey asked as she turned to her back on the glass door and faced out toward the city skyline.

Imogen started to worry. "A little. You aren't going to chuck me over the rail, are you?"

"Let's just keep our backs to the door and look out over Santa Fe as we talk, shall we," Rey said. "I don't trust Sophie and Linna with knowledge of what we're going to be talking about. Now, please take a peek over the balcony and look down at the courtyard. We need to give those two women a nice show."

Imogen carefully grasped the railing and peeked over, glancing at Rey. "Is this okay?"

"That's fine," Rey replied with a smile, and leaned over the balcony railing a little bit herself. "I am having a meeting tonight with my Council, and we'll be discussing what we know about the Black Key, and what we might be able to do to stop it, and maybe even close some of the Breaches." She held out her hand pointed down over the railing toward the tiny courtyard. "Be careful when going through that gate down there, by the way. It can become a doorway into the Hedge."

Imogen frowned. "When? How? And whose hedge?"

"Sorry," Rey said, "I thought Less may have told you some of this stuff. The Hedge is like a buffer between this world and the realms of the True Fey. Very dangerous, especially to those mortals - beings who who cannot use fey magic. A Door into the Hedge is a kind of gate, letting anyone and anything pass through from this world and the Hedge. Kind of like how you can travel through a locus or a shoal into Shadow. Unfortunately, they can open at random, so you need to be careful walking through anything that could act like a door, such as a gate, a space between a fallen tee and the ground, and archway, and so on."

"Surely there is more to it," Imogen said. "I've been using doorways for centuries and never had a problem getting where I was going."

Rey shrugged a little. "The laws of Faerie do not follow a logic the human mind can easily comprehend. But not every doorway is an entrance into the Hedge." She looked at Imogen and sighed. "I'm probably creating more confusion than clarity, aren't I."

"Aye."

"I was hoping you could tell me more about what you might be able do to help restrain Richard and the Key, and anything you might need that we can get you," Rey said.

"I can put down a ward either to contain him or protect us. It takes a minute to do that.

Then it will be his strength against my ability with wards. If I prove stronger, he'll never penetrate it. If he breaks through well, then he's free. Either way I figure it slows him down."

"Alright. If he doesn't break through, how long will the ward last. Do you need to set the duration when creating it, or is it until you drop it or you go unconscious, that kind of thing?"

"It will last as long as we need it to, or I can make it permanent. What is best depends on the situation," she said.

"How good are you at wards?" Rey glanced at Imogen. "Richard himself is very strong, and with his magic can make himself stronger still, strong enough to pick up a small car and throw it around. And we have no idea how much stronger the Key can make him."

Imogen shrugged. "My wards test favorably against the strongest Uratha marauders out there. Those are unfriendly werewolves. Physical strength means nothing. Only strength of personality. My wards hadn't been defeated for a very long time until that dragon came along. I would say they are strong."

"Uratha marauders?" Rey repeated with a quirked eyebrow. "What do you mean?"

"There are werewolves out there, terrorists who attack any spirit that has slipped into this world, and even hunt those in the spirit world for sport and for personal gain. They are arrogant and believe it is their right to do so. Sometimes they seek to 'save' humans from spirits that have gone into them, ignoring the fact the human usually invited them in. Uratha then 'save' the humans them by murdering them and hunting down and destroying the spirit that had become one with them as well.

"Beings these werewolves cannot define get lumped into the 'enemy' category and they try to kill them, too. Since I'm both spirit and human, then when they find me they usually figure I'm yet another 'victim' and kill me and then try to hunt down my spirit, too. They are extremely annoying.

"But not all of them are like that. These Uratha mostly stick to the cities. Most werewolves actually don't live in cities at all. Some of them are nutty and best avoided, but a few are quite respectful and can even be dealt with. The ones I dealt with the most consider themselves part of a tribe called Predator Kings. The name is apt. But they approach me with respect, not with bared claws."

Before Rey had been Taken, she'd have immediately leaped to her friends' defense, denying most of what Imogen said as Pure lies. Now, though, she was a little bit amused. "Would you be surprised to know I was once adopted into a pack of werewolves, and the mate of their ritual leader?"

"Not too surprised, no. Many werewolves will take a non-werewolf mate. The coincidence

is interesting, though." She gazed down at a corvette that was now parking in the lot below. She smiled at a memory. "Being the lover of a werewolf can be as exciting as it is dangerous, and twice as fulfilling." *But nothing lasts forever.* She watched a man with brown hair going to grey step out of the corvette.

"Both my mate and my pack found my abilities to be a benefit to them, and had no problem with the fact I had dealt with spirits all the time, and that I could allow spirits to ride me." Rey paused for the briefest of moments. "My mate and pack were Uratha."

"Really. And they let you just run around loose without having to join them?" Imogen didn't believe it for a second. She knew those Uratha had to feel they could control the situation or Rey to allow it to go on.

"They never considered me a threat," Rey replied. "I was the friend of one of the pack members before she Changed. Besides, I asked to join the pack. They weren't too keen on it until I had a chat with their totem spirit. The spirit decided it was a good thing, and so it happened. Nor did they ever try to control what I did, either with my magic or anything else."

Imogen looked at Rey. "They trusted you," she said almost curiously.

"They did," Rey replied with a nod. "I had someone to vouch for me, and even more, I proved myself to be an asset, not a liability or a threat. I could do things for them they found extremely useful, things they couldn't do themselves."

"I'm glad you had friendships to build upon. I think our experiences aren't so different. Just with different werewolves," Imogen said.

"Perhaps," Rey agreed, though she had a hard time believing anything good could come of associating with the Pure. "Maybe someday we could compare notes about werewolves, both learn something new from each other."

"Maybe." She added cautiously, "Do you still have connections with them?"

"That pack?" Rey said. "No. They are on the other side of the country. But I am friendly with a pack in Santa Fe. Not that I will tell them anything about you, if that's what you wish."

"I wish not. Not only do these Uratha typically have a dim view of me, they have been at war with a side that I dealt with favorably in recent decades."

"Then I won't say anything to them about or your locus," Rey said, "but if they learn about it or you through other means, I won't lie to them say I don't know. All I'll say is that I know what's there, and that you just wish to be left alone."

Another car arrived. It was a red mustang that had been modified with loud exhaust and

fancy street wheels. The young man that came out bounced around to the passenger side and helped out a young woman who didn't seem very steady on her feet. She was loud and apparently laughing at nothing.

"Can you tell me if they are close to my home?" Imogen asked, watching the people below.

Rey shook her head. "There is a significant distance between what I believe is the boundary of their territory and your home. That doesn't mean, though, that there isn't a pack where you are that simply hasn't met up with you yet."

"There is. Or at least there was," Imogen said. "They haven't stopped by in a while."

"They were a Pure pack?"

"Predator Kings," Imogen said.

Rey nodded. "You may not hear from them again for quite a while. The casualties in the war were high on both sides."

The young man finally got the woman aimed toward the entrance. Imogen watched them disappear inside, then looked away and turned to face the apartment. "I'm better at uncovering information than direct confrontation," she said, referring to the problem with the Black Key again.

"Before I forget. If you didn't already know, never say thank you to one of the fey. The old and powerful of us will take it to mean you consider yourself in our debt. And we always collect." Rey turned back toward the glass door and moved to open it. "And nobody can be good at everything. We really appreciate your offer to help."

"I'm glad for the opportunity to return the kindness Less did me," Imogen said.

The two came back inside.

Meanwhile, Less received another report from his network. They'd mentioned Richard had gone into Blood Tears but hadn't come out. They got hold of Claire who was going to go inside to be sure they kept eyes on him, but he was seen exiting out the back by Worm. After walking down the alley, he sprouted... *wings* and flew off. They lost him at that point.

Rey walked over and stood next to Les and looked down at the map again. "I've called a meeting of my Black Council for tonight," she said softly in their motley's secret language. "The first part will be Court business, but the rest of it will be about the Key. What we know, what we've done so far, and coming up with a plan to deal with the situation, as it is Autumn's role to deal with threats like this. Will you come for the planning part, to tell us what your Wardens and other intelligence gatherers have been able to discover?"

"Yes, for what it's worth," he replied. "You already know everything that I know."

"The meeting isn't until 11:30," Rey said. "There's still time for more information that could come in. And you can introduce Imogen's offer to help as an anonymous contact. Much easier, I think, if you were to do it, and I believe she would far more prefer to deal with you than with me."

"I'll be there."

"Corazon, in Santa Fe. When you get there, if you want one, get yourself a drink and have the bartender to put it on my tab. I'll send someone out to get you when we're ready."

(I'll post the first half of the meeting here soon, which Graeme can read or not at his leisure. In the meanwhile, he does get a couple reports in from the Wardens. The first is about the Richards. :) The second is in the form of a report that Less gets just prior to going to Corazon's. His people thought he might appreciate a file on the Black Council members. ;)

The Wardens of the Bleak Seal did in fact have some information for Less. Not long into the early evening, he received a call from Septimus Snow. He told Less that Richard had been spotted going into Glasshouse, and it seemed strange because Richard wasn't acting like someone who wanted to stay hidden for the next three weeks. He was acting like he wanted to be seen.

Worse, a separate report placed Richard lurking into an alley near the location it was suspected he maintained an apartment. This should be impossible because at that precise moment he was supposedly going into Glasshouse.

Septimus was discomfited. Something was going on and whatever it was, it couldn't mean good news.

He closed his call stating that the network reported the Autumn crown had passed to Rey Lafitte. Septimus offered Less congratulations on the newfound power now inherent in the coterie Less led. He then stated that they had information on something called the Black Council -- something like an advisory committee meant to advise or assist the new queen in some way. He thought Less would like to see the report on these members personally and offered to meet Less later.

About an hour before the Black Council meeting was set to start, Rey sat at the bar at Corazon, sipping a drink and relaxing. She was dressed a bit more formally than some of

the people there, with a business suit-like outfit and high heeled shoes. She wanted to make a good impression, or perhaps have a chance to start working on changing a negative one.

Eventually, Rey noticed two women sitting next to the door of the partitioned-off area Corazon's used for parties. The thing that caught her eye was first that they seemed more interested in watching the bar than drinking or talking with each other. The second was that they looked familiar -- like priestesses from the monastery.

Rey decided to sit there for a while, watching them, and wait to see how long it took for them to notice. She waited a while, but the two women didn't seem to take any special notice of her. Eventually, a waitress arrived with two glasses of wine. One of the women paid and then picked up the wine and went into the room.

The Autumn Queen (and it was going to take quite a while for Rey to get comfortable thinking of herself that way) turned back to the bar and pulled out her phone. Three buttons pushed and she was calling Mira.

Mira answered right away, as if she had her phone in hand already. "Hello?"

"I don't suppose you know," Rey said softly in Glymjack, "why Mayra may have sent some of her priestesses to Corazon?"

"They're with me. I managed to convince them to let me come, but the condition was that they got to keep an eye on me. But I thought of a way to keep their eyes and ears out of our meeting. It came with um... a small price. I had to let someone else come with me. But I think you'll be pleased," Mira hurried to say.

As Rey watched, the door opened again and the woman that had brought in glasses of wine returned to her spot with her associate.

"I have The Prophet with me. His name is Stuart and he's a wiz at warding. We went to Corazon's early to get it all set up for you. In fact, I think he just finished." There was a pause. "What's that Stuart?" Mira asked someone near her. "Okay. Yes, he confirmed he's finished. No one outside of this room will overhear you. Including my escort out there."

"Excellent," Rey said. "Was his company the only price you had to pay?"

"Yup," she said, a little proud of herself.

"What's he like?" Rey asked.

Rey couldn't see, but Mira was giving Stuart an appraising look. "Like a man that has been all by himself for much of the past two centuries. He's right here with me, so if you come early you can meet him for yourself."

"I'll be there as soon as I can," Rey said, disconnecting the call. She slipped her phone back into her purse, picked up her briefcase and drink and went to the door, and knocked.

It opened. The two priestesses looked ready to spring out of their chairs but Mira smiled and told Rey to come in. Relaxed again, the priestesses settled back down and Mira closed the door behind her friend.

The room had two tables put together in the middle and seven chairs. There were two glasses of red wine at the end of the table, near an interesting man of unusual height. He had long, straight, golden hair and angular features. He was a thin man, but not boney. He wore simple v-neck shirt and jeans with his cowboy boots, and completed the outfit with a thick, Celtic torc.

Mira herself wore mostly what Rey had seen her in before; a charcoal skirt that went to just above her knees, stockings and a pleasantly neutral top. Someone had lent her a shawl that was still draped over her shoulders.

"I had no idea you were here in the bar already," she said. "This is Stuart Read, otherwise known as The Prophet."

He smiled and bowed graciously. It was out of place in this era, but he managed to make it look natural.

"Nice to meet you," Rey said with a smile. "I'm sure Mira has told you how much we appreciate your warding the room for us." She lay her soft-sided briefcase down on the table. It didn't hold much, just a few notepads and a couple of pens and pencils. She'd used it because it was handy - it was in the trunk of her car.

Stuart, the prophet, smiled. He had an English accent but it was more Oxford than anything. Like it could have been learned. "It is no trouble, especially since not only do I get a rare chance to get out, I'm given the opportunity to enjoy the company of such beautiful, invigorating and interesting women as the two of you."

Mira found his choice of words... interesting but she'd already learned that sometimes it was better not to ask.

"Invigorating?" Rey raised an eyebrow, bemused at his comment.

"Yes, indeed. An especially exciting sense of danger lingers about the both of you and I hope to experience more of your intriguing aura soon."

"A thrillseeker by nature, Stuart?" Rey asked. "Or is life with the priestesses unbearably boring?" She smiled and took a quick sip of her drink, wondering what he meant by experiencing her aura. Something naughty most likely.

"Fate is twined about you like ropes on a submissive," he said. "Intriguing." He moved to a

chair and took a seat, then tossed his legs up on the edge of the table and tilted back comfortably. "I look forward to the meeting."

Mira sighed. "*The price for the wards...*"

Rey knew she probably shouldn't ask, but she couldn't help herself. "Both of us, or me in particular?" She didn't mind the comment about submissiveness. There was nothing wrong with that, at least not in the right situation with the right people. However, she knew he wasn't talking about sex or bondage or anything else like that.

He ignored the question. "How soon before the others arrive?"

Mira, standing behind him so he couldn't see, sighed, "I would be wary of asking him questions. I don't think his answers are ever what they really seem to be."

Rey glanced at her watch. "About forty five minutes or so."

He held a hand out. "Drink."

Mira rolled her eyes. "*Get it yourself.*" She took a sip of her own wine. "*I bought it, you can serve yourself.*"

A hawkish look came easily to his features, but only Rey could see it. It passed and he grinned again. He took his feet down so he could reach his wine, which he sipped and savored. "Well then, why don't you join us. The wine is cheap, too dry, but it does the job."

Mira didn't look very pleased but held her tongue.

Rey raised her glass. "I already have a drink, but I appreciate the offer. I must say, though, I hadn't expected to have a guest for the meeting." Her tone wasn't accusatory as she glanced between Mira and Stuart.

He pointed to a chair. "I mean, join us."

Mira said, "*Honestly, I thought he would just hang out at the bar. None of what we discuss here will be of interest or use to you, Stuart.*"

"No worries. I simply wanted to meet your friends and acquaintances. And then I'll leave you to your meeting. Is that better?"

Mira nodded.

"Very good. I won't intrude on your club, then. But I see so few people you understand. I meet almost no one new, except when a new sister is inducted into the priesthood. This is a grand opportunity for me to meet someone different than what I've been allowed for so

long.”

For Mira’s part, she did look sympathetic, even felt a little guilty for thinking he was being manipulative and intrusive. He had to have been miserable, locked up for two centuries with no one but a bunch of paranoid cultists to talk to. She pulled out a chair next to him and sat down.

He flashed her a pleased smile, then looked to see if Rey would as well.

“I’m surprised you haven’t just up and left,” Rey said as she took a seat opposite Stuart and angled the chair slightly so she had a view of the door as well. “They’re not keeping you against your will, are they?”

“Yes, in fact they are,” he said. He watched Rey with veiled eyes and a dead serious tone.

“How have they prevented you from escaping?” She took a sip of her drink and settle back into her chair. This information was yet another thing that so endeared the priestesses to her.

“Some of them have magic. They are aware of it and are quite skilled with it.”

Rey watched him for a moment. “Were you intending to use this meeting as a means of escape?”

“My freedom should be rather low on your priority list at the moment, and probably about the last thing you should be asking.”

“Just idle chit chat,” Rey replied with a little shrug. “As for asking questions, past experience has taught me that asking oracles and prophets for advice and information doesn’t always end well. Unless, of course, you have things you can share with us about the priestesses or the Black Key and how it uses its Bearer that we can use to our advantage.”

“If you know something about the priestesses that you could use to your advantage, how would you use it?” Stuart mused. “That could be interesting, but it’s too soon for that. As far as the Black Key, I believe the sisters have been quite forthcoming about that, haven’t they.”

“I’d use the information to protect me and mine,” Rey replied. “Prevent them from turning on us. And I don’t think they’ve told us everything. I find it hard to believe that Mayra has shared everything she knows with them.”

Stuart shrugged. “Who does?”

“You said it was too soon to tell me about the priestesses we could use to our advantage, Rey commented. “Do you have everything all planned out?”

"What's everything?" He shook his head. "I don't have plans."

"Now I find that hard to believe," Rey replied with a smile. "Everyone has plans, even if it's just to have a drink with two ladies with invigorating auras."

He snuck a hand behind Mira and put on the small of her back. Then he gave Rey a winning smile. "I find I have a keen interest in invigorating things lately."

Rey looked from where he'd put his hand, to Mira's face, and sent her friend an enquiring look. Mira hid her face by taking a long drink of wine, but that in itself revealed something had happened between Mira and Stuart.

The Fairest wondered who had done the seducing, and how far things had gone. Whatever the answer was, it was something Mira had not wanted anyone to know. Rey just hoped it didn't come out when Drake arrived.

Then, as if they were in the midst of some bad play - or a soap opera - there was a knock on the door.

Mira stood and said, "I'll get that." She used the opportunity to break Stuart's contact with her.

"I'll help you." Stuart got up and followed her to the door.

She opened it, blocking him out with a backward step that should have made him back up, but he didn't seem to mind her ass bumping into him.

"*Drake!*" Mira said with a smile. "*Don't mind the female brute squad over there. Come on in.*" She ground her heel into Stuart's foot; he quickly got out of the way.

"Mira," Drake replied, his voice warm and appreciative. As Mira closed the door behind him, he took her free hand and gave it a lingering kiss before turning to Rey. He looked briefly at a point over her head, and was able to make out the faint outline of her crown.

He released Mira's hand and bowed elegantly to Rey. "Good evening, your Majesty."

Rey nodded in return. "Good evening, Drake," she said, then her eyes flitted to Stuart to see his reaction.

He had a small, knowing smile on his face. He pushed the door closed, then stepped to Mira's side, slipping an arm around her waist. She stepped away; he stepped with her, forbidding her an easy and polite way to disengage.

"Will you introduce us, my dear?" he asked of Mira.

She gritted her teeth. "Drake, this is Stuart Read. Stuart, Drake and I are dating."

Stuart's smile broadened. "Oh, I see." He released Mira and looked apologetic. "And a wonderful girl you have," he said. He then slapped Mira on the ass and gave it a firm squeeze.

Mira yelped and slapped his hand away.

Rey took in a quick breath and held it, hoping that things remained cool and calm.

A frown formed on Drake's face, and he offered his hand to Mira. "That's not how someone should treat a lady." He was not happy with the way Stuart treated Mira, whatever the reason.

Mira took his hand and gratefully joined Drake at his side.

"In my day," Stuart said, "a man would do whatever is necessary to keep a woman safe from others -- and herself. I must admit, that if I had a woman like your Mira, I'm not sure we'd venture out of the bedroom."

Drake took one glance at Mira's blushing cheeks and interposed himself between Stuart and the woman he deeply cared for. "And who are you to be saying these things."

"These are grim times, my friend," Stuart told Drake. His smile faded away and he got right up in Drake's face. "If I had a girl like her, a girl upon which the fate of the world rested, I'd pay a little more attention. I'd want to make sure that when she needed to hear it, she knew what she meant to me. There are a lot of tempting things out there." He leaned to the side to peek at Mira. "Aren't there, my sweet?" He stood upright again. "You need to decide if you are strong enough for her, and then be there."

He eyed Drake. "Honestly, friend, I don't think you have it in you. Perhaps she'd be better off with me."

Drake swung at Stuart, but his anger overrode his skill and he landed a blow that any normal man could give.

The blow was strong enough to turn Stuart's head. He felt his jaw, gauging the blow, and then grinned at Drake. "Well, boy, I certainly hope you fuck better than you fight."

There was the swish of metal slicing through air as Drake's sword appeared suddenly in his hand. A quick step forward, and the blade of Drake's weapon was sticking out of Stuart's back. With a snarl and a twist, the draconic changeling pulled his sword out of Stuart's abdomen. "What do you think now, bastard."

"Nice... one..." Stuart said. A moment later, his legs buckled and he dropped to his knees,

then fell over unconscious.

Mira stared at Stuart as he bled out.

"Drake! You just stabbed The Prophet!" Tears were in her eyes.

"So what? He should never have opened his mouth, let alone insulted what I feel for you. What we feel for each other."

"You are so romantic." She grabbed him by the collar and mashed her lips hard against his.

Drake was startled, but gave himself over to the kiss.

"Um, Mira. Mira!" Rey called out. "If we can't stop his bleeding, then The Prophet will die, and I don't want to explain it to the priestesses or to Alexei!"

Mira didn't seem to hear. But when they kiss ended, she asked, "Did you know he was immortal?"

"Immortal?" Drake looked down at Stuart with disgust. "Do you mean he'll get up and walk away, giving him another chance to be an asshole?"

Rey remained where she was, otherwise silent, glad to see that Stuart appeared to have succeeded in what he was trying to do, and hoped Drake wouldn't kill the immortal a second time. The thought of what The Prophet had wanted to accomplish was very sobering. She was glad, now, that there was a much better chance that Mira would survive, that neither the Key would take her, nor the Ice Princess could keep control. It also stirred her grief as the knowledge that Richard was truly lost. She didn't know if the love she felt for him was enough for his thread, to bring him back to her.

She was proud of herself; this time no tears fell. That was important, as Lydia and the others would be arriving any minute, though hopefully not before they'd had a chance to clean the room up.

Mira had Drake's hand in hers, her fingers twined with his as she turned to stare down at Stuart. *"Well. I'm not really sure how it works. For the record, I do not enjoy getting slapped on the ass... in public."* She smiled at him.

Stuart sat up. He looked at Drake, grinned, and held up a hand. "I yield. And I stand... er sit corrected. You won't have any more trouble out of me." He looked at Mira and winked but his face was serious. "You have my apologies for my deplorable behavior." To Drake he said simply, "I'd apologize to you, too, but you did stab me. I figure we're even." He managed, barely, to climb back to his feet, using a chair for assistance.

Drake merely nodded at Stuart, not letting go of Mira's hand.

"There's no saving Richard, is there," Rey said to Stuart, her voice soft and resigned.

"The future that faces us all has many forks," he told her. "Each fork represents a crucial point where action will decide the future. It has been a long time since the future has been so snarled with forks," Stuart said. "Even your Richard's fate is forked. Telling you what the fork is or if he will live or die, eliminates that fork. Even now you are deciding his fate by losing hope and faith. It will blind you to future possibilities, causing forks to wither and die before you ever have even a chance to make a decision. All I can tell you, Rey, Queen of Autumn, is that your decisions will determine the life and death of many people. And, your decisions will determine *how* those lives are spent.

"Now if you'll excuse me, my welcome has been overstayed. Rest assured your council meeting is secured. I shall retire to the gentle care of my keepers." He limped from the room with about as much dignity as a man with a fresh hole in his middle could muster.

When he was gone and the door closed, Mira had her arms around Drake. *"I didn't know I meant that much to you. You could have killed a man tonight."* She looked into his eyes, searching for what he was feeling.

"I should have found a way to tell you," Drake said, his eyes revealing the depth of his feelings for her. "I just thought we had more time."

Rey sat back, watching the lovers, letting the jealousy and anger run through her but keeping it quiet, keeping it to herself. Stuart had made her feel like an unruly child. It was like Grey was lecturing her all over again. She'd walked away from that relationship, putting more of the blame on him than on herself. She'd given up. She wasn't going to do that this time.

She was going to fight for Richard, and all of Stuart's forks could go to hell for all she cared. Yes, they may have never spoken the words, Richard may have never killed a man for her, but he had to know how she felt about him.

"I'm sorry to interrupt," Rey said, her voice calmer and stronger than it might have been only a few moments ago. "But we need to deal with all that blood everywhere. Mira, is there something you can do about that?"

Mira said, *"Yes. But I need somewhere to put it."*

"I have some ziploc bags in my briefcase," Rey said, and she wasn't about to tell them why she had them. "Will that work? We can dump it in the toilet or something later."

"Perfect."

With the baggies, Mira had the blood rolling itself up and away in no time. Very little had dried, leaving nothing easily seen.

"Excellent," Rey said. She carefully placed the smaller bags into one of the larger ones, just in case they leaked, and tucked them into her briefcase. With a glance at her watch, she sighed. "Just in time. Fifteen minutes before the others are supposed to arrive." She paused, and a little smile crossed her lips. "I wonder how much apologizing I'll have to do. Alexei has a strict no weapons, take all the fights outside policy."

Mira smiled at Drake and said to Rey, "*I won't tell him if you don't.*"

"Let's hope, then, that Alexei doesn't sense the blood," Rey said. "He's a Venombite, with a very good sense of smell."

Mira's smile seemed stuck on her face. She couldn't help wondering if it was wrong to be really turned on, but she wasn't feeling very scary and autumn-y right now. Clearly her mind was somewhere else, the evidence in her eyes as she looked at Drake.

"Business first, Mira," Rey said with a soft chuckle. "You can demonstrate to Drake the depths of your appreciation for what he did in a very graphic manner later. Right now, Lydia and her two choices for the council will be arriving any minute."

Mira blushed at being so transparent. She refocused and cleared her throat. "Do you have seating already decided?"

"No," Rey said with a quick shake of her head, "except to make sure you and Lydia did not sit side by side. And you and Drake not next to each other to prevent groping and footsies under the table." She gave her friend a little grin.

Mira protested. "*I wouldn't be that immature!*" She glanced at Drake, then smiled. "*Yes I would.*"

Mira suggested that Rey sit at the head of the table, Lydia at the end, and then have people mixed on either side so that Mira and Drake were kitty corner. Mira told Rey that although she'd never finished school, it seemed to her it would be less us-versus-them with such a mixed seating.

Rey approved of the seating plan, and carefully placed her briefcase next to her chair at the head of the table. She took her seat, picked up her glass and took a long, slow sip of her drink. Drake took his seat, though he had no drink.

"Mira, if you'd like to get Drake a drink," Rey said, "go ahead and get him one. Tell the bartender to put it on my tab."

Mira stood up, happy to do that. She paused, though and tried to remember if she knew what he liked. She couldn't. "What's your favorite drink?" she asked him.

"Not something that I say in polite company," Drake replied with a smile, "but a beer will

be fine.”

Mira went out to find something. She noticed Stuart was sitting, one priestess on either side of him. He looked as if he was having a grand time with two women, but Mira knew the truth; they weren't letting him out of their sight again this evening and didn't care if he had no fun.

She really didn't care one way or the other. She went to the bar and found something called, "Ruinination". The bottle said it promised to ruin your taste for lesser beer. She looked at it for a while, but decided that was the wrong kind of message. She decided on something with a blue label called "Howl at the Moon". She had no idea if it was good or not, but the bartender promised her people liked it. She put it on Rey's tab and headed back to the room.

She shut the door behind her and presented Drake with the bottle and a glass.

"Much appreciated," he said with a smile, and carefully poured the beer.

It wasn't long after that Lydia and her associates arrived.

Rey watched all three as they entered the room, wanting to see how they moved and reacted to the situation before she said anything.

The three came in and before a word was spoke, Lydia made a modest dip in acknowledgement of the crown while Natalie Richman and Judd Gourmay both bowed.

Lydia, as always, wore a voluminous, floor-sweeping black dress that hid her legs. Natalie had chosen black slacks and frilly blue top. Being pale as snow and her hair the dark, deep blue of the deepest glacier the ensemble suited her. Judd leaned his cane, a slender one with a dull metallic head that was dark enough features carved there were difficult to discern, against the wall. He was dressed formally in a black suit fashionable today. His hair was combed back and he sported a thin moustache and goatee that made him look extremely rich or like the devil, or both. He was, of course, a very handsome man, a walking inspiration to artists and poets.

Lydia and her two council members also greeted Mira and then Drake. Although Judd seemed to pay Drake no more attention than anyone else in the room, Natalie was more interested. Or at least, she stared at him longer than she did Mira or Rey.

At Rey's indication to take a seat, the Black Council was convened.

"Good evening," Rey said, deciding to start with good manners. "I appreciate the willingness of all of you to be a part of the Black Council. I believe now would be an appropriate time to set down what the basic rules and requirements of the council are, in order to avoid any future confusion."

A few heads nodded. Lydia looked like she would wait for Rey to lead off.

“The purpose of the council is to provide me with advice and information, and to approve any decisions I make that apply to the Autumn Court, and the Duchy as a whole, until such time as the council decides such supervision is no longer required,” Rey said. She knew that it was likely they never would want to give up the right of approval, but she wanted it out in the open, and on the table. She also wanted to let them know she felt that one day she would no longer require such supervision, but her pledge required her to maintain the council and heed their approvals. Nobody said anything about the council changing their mandate.

“The balance of members will stay the same. Two of my choice and two of Magister Lydia’s choice, or of her successor should she some day leave the Council.” She paused, waiting to see what Lydia and the others had to say.

“What is required for the Council to approve or recommend a decision?” Natalie asked.

“A simple majority,” Rey replied. She knew the way the council was stacked that the odds would often be against her, unless she could win at least one of Lydia’s choices to her side. She’d need more information about that, and she knew exactly who to ask.

“How is it decided that a matter should be brought to the council and not something the Queen should dispense with herself, immediately?” Judd asked.

Lydia helped out here. “The Queen will decide. She has pledged that all major decisions that affect the Court or the Duchy as a whole will be brought to the council so long as she is Queen. You can therefore be assured that if she fails to do so, her crown will be forfeit and I will assume the throne.”

“And what if there is a matter of which she is unaware. Or if she is unaware a seemingly small matter is nevertheless of great importance?” Judd pressed.

“The Wyrd judges intent appropriately. However, if members of the council disagree as to the importance of a subject, or come across something new that should be council matter, the councillor’s first duty is to report it to the Queen. Only if the matter is still in debate should he or she attempt to bring the matter up here. This council will not be bogged down with minutia or needless make-work. Any councillor that attempts to bring a matter up here and bypasses the Queen’s right to do so, requires the support of at least two other councillors -- a simple majority.”

Lydia said more directly, “Judd, nobody wants to spend all their available time sitting here and debating what’s best for court and duchy. Lucky for us, that’s the Queen’s job. We’re here to help her with the big stuff. That’s it.”

Judd seemed satisfied.

Mira asked, *"How will these matters be debated?"* All heads turned toward her as her voice tingled in ears all around the table. *"A chaotic council will offer the Queen no advantage."*

"The person who brings a matter to the attention of the council during a meeting will have the first opportunity to speak on the subject. Others who have input will be giving the opportunity to speak, to ask and answer questions, all in turn. Once all have had their say, if necessary, a vote will be taken. If at any time the council feels the conversation and debate is getting out of hand, a simple majority vote can be taken to end the discussion and require a vote. If the matter is not pressing, a vote can also be taken to defer a vote and continued discussion until some agreed upon date. Likewise, if it is decided there is not enough information to make a decision, a simple majority vote can decide for a continuance for the information to be gathered, with the council to be reconvened at an agreed upon date."

"Are there any other questions?" Lydia asked. The table was quiet. "Then I move we approve the aforementioned guidelines for the operation of this Council."

After the Queen asked for a second, Natalie offered her support. The Council made it's first decision unanimously.

"I have asked King Winter to join us for the discussion of the situation with the Black Key," Rey informed the council. "He has given me his support, and his Wardens have been collecting information about the Key's activities. He can also tell us what other resources Winter has to offer, if any may be of use."

After heads nodded again around the table, Mira offered, *"Would you like me to see if here's and bring him in?"*

"Please," Rey said with a nod. "If any of you would like a drink, I have a tab running at the bar tonight."

REPORT ON MEMBERS OF AUTUMN'S BLACK COUNCIL. CONSTABLE'S EYES ONLY.

Rey

The Winter King himself is considered to be an expert on this topic.

Mira

The Winter King himself is considered to be an expert on this topic.

Drake

Upper middle-range in the power structure of Summer, he hold no important posts. But

likely invited due to Rey's familiarity and Mira's trust.

Lydia

Sister of the former Queen. Known to have spider legs sprouting from her back. A black widow's red mark can be seen on her stomach when they shift subtly. She is considered to be as powerful and knowledgeable as her elder sister.

One story of horror was that Lydia, losing herself to the instincts of a spider, devoured her tyrant mate after sex. In one terrible night, as she lay weak and sated, she became pregnant. To her horror, she gave birth to a million tiny, black spiders which then bit her with poisonous fangs. As she writhed and moaned, the little bastards assembled themselves, transformed again into the Spider King. He laughed with delight and pleasure at Lydia's horrified torment and told her how he looked forward to what might happen next time they would mate.

Lydia is the Magister of Nightmares and so is the final judge and jury for Autumn. The Ghul can therefore be sent by the Magister of Nightmares as well as the Queen, but it is the Magister who does any execution called for by the Duchy or the Autumn Court (though that is very rare). This is because few, if any, have the stomach for it.

Natalie Richman

An elemental Snowskin capable of invoking terror at the sound of her voice, she is similar to Mira in some respects. Like Mira she is also well versed in changeling magics and a known sorceress. She pushes for the Autumn Court to rule in the areas of occult expertise and Hedge mastery. She wields great mystical power, but could in no way be considered a nymph like Mira. Her cold and terrifying nature forbids it.

Judd Gourmay

Traditionally avoiding politics, his addition to the Black Council is both a surprise and potentially a concern to all other Great courts. Judd is very experienced and likely very capable. He has not previously spent a great time and effort involving himself in changeling politics, but rumors of his abilities abound, with little being truly confirmed.

He is suspected to be a master Hedge Duelist. It's been confirmed he's dueled several changelings over the years regarding rights to what he views as "his" humans. Specifically these are artists of various sorts — from comic book artists to painters, as well as writers including book authors and poets. He owns a highly successful publishing business and is thought to be a Muse. Artists that sign up with him never leave — unless poached by another changeling. That makes him angry, apparently. Judd has never lost a duel. All his opponents have been worse than humiliated and beaten — Judd hurts them so badly they will never challenge him again. This usually leaves his opponents deranged. These days, no one interferes with his business.

His skill as a duelist is likely the least of his capabilities, however. Estimates place him at nearly the same rank of power as Ishtar. That makes him likely more personally capable than all of the other regents. This has never been a concern of interest, however, because

Judd never showed an interest in Duchy politics. Until now.

Conclusions

The Wardens suggest that with Veridia now gone and the Queen of Autumn now answering to a council rather than acting alone, Winter's ally may actually be stronger than ever. Should the Winter King continue to maintain positive relations with Autumn, he may gain access to Autumn's best, including not only Queen Lafitte and the Sorceress Mira of his motley, but also the likes of Judd Gourmay and the mystical prowess of Natalie Richman.

Recommendations

Contracts of Autumn allow this court the best chance of negotiating with hobgoblins, minions of the Gentry, and even the Gentry themselves. This capability is an advantage for the Duchy if Autumn can be convinced to do so on the Duchy's behalf. If not the Duchy as a whole, then Winter's close ties to Autumn should, at the least, provide a substantial advantage.

The Wardens suggest that the Winter King might be in an excellent position to advise Autumn and thereby preserve the security of the Duchy.

Mira came out of the back room and looked around. Nestled within the comfortable obscurity of his mantle, Less saw her pass by him as she looked around the room.

Also of interest to Less was the man seated with two women. He was sure he'd seen the women before, at the monastery. The women and the man all watched Mira. She'd stopped and said something to them when she came out of the room and from her body language she was trying to assure them of something. Less guessed it was the sisters and that she was trying to assure them she was looking for Less, not escape.

Less put his beer down and walked slowly across the bar. The man with the priestesses intrigued him. He took a photo of the three of them in the mirror of the bar. He shed his mantle slowly as he pushed through the crowd and touched Mira lightly on the elbow to announce his presence.

Mira turned to him with surprise in her eyes, but she smiled in recognition. *"Hi Less! I mean,"* she leaned to his ear to whisper, *"your Majesty. They are being formal in there. Also, I wanted to tell you before you went in that I made an arrangement with the sisters. They let me come here in person so long as I don't leave that room or their sight. I also finagled getting the Prophet to come with me. That's Stuart over there between them. He has cast a ward to prevent any eavesdropping but he picked a fight with Drake, who then stabbed him, so he has to wait out here."*

"A troublemaker, is he? I'm surprised that they let him stray at all. I wonder if he has two

hundred years of Stockholm Syndrome or the priestesses are getting lax?"

Mira switched to Glymjack sign. "I managed to embarrass several priestesses so bad I thought they didn't know whether to faint or drop dead right there. The rest I pissed off so much they were looking for any excuse to get rid of me for a few hours."

"That explains your day pass," he signed back. "But not why they would let their visionary loose."

"He isn't actually loose. I'm pretty sure." She glanced at Stuart and her face was a troubled mixture of sympathy and sorrow for him. She'd been more in touch with her emotions ever since Leopold and his allies got their hands on her, but this was still unusual for her. "They put that torc on his neck before he left. I used my sorcery to find out that the woman on the left knows magic, and that the torc is a device they can use to get power over him. To stop him if he tries to leave. Trust me, he's still a prisoner."

She didn't like it one bit, even though Stuart had been a jerk to her. In her mind, and the minds of most changelings, no one deserved to be held prisoner against their will. No excuses. Less knew her well enough that he'd be surprised if Mira didn't do something to set the Prophet free before this was all over.

And when she did, he wanted to be there to catch the torc when it fell from his neck. The King of Winter and the Contable of the Bleak Seal had a need for such devices.

"Is the Black Council ready for my briefing?" he asked by way of changing the subject. "I hope Rey isn't getting any flak from her new Council." After he said it, though, he figured she would be quick to deal harshly on any testing of her authority.

"I think so far, it's going well. And yes, they are ready for you," Mira signed in return. She guided him past the sisters and their charge. The man with the sharp features and long, straight blonde hair watched Less silently as they passed. Then Mira opened the door and got them both into the meeting room where the new Queen Lafitte awaited the King of Winter.

Less paused at the doorway. Normally at official court functions at Iron Mountain people were announced as they entered. He looked over the Black Council, his gaze resting on Ms. Richman and Mr. Gourmay as they were unfamiliar to him. His eyes glided right over Drake. Finding that no announcement was to be made, he greeted Rey with several smiles. "Autumn's Black Council, I presume?"

"Please have a seat," Rey said with a smile and gestured at the empty chair at the side of the table.

The King of Winter nodded to the Black Council and took his seat, placing his slim attache case on the table in front of him. He put his hat next to it and tucked his umbrella under the table.

While the councillors hadn't risen and bowed, that was to be expected as it was not his time currently to rule and he, of course, not their King. Nevertheless, each of them murmured a polite greeting to the Winter King or nodded deferentially.

Mira found her seat, which was beside Less. *"Have you found something new, King Seleman?"*

"I think it might be best," Rey added with a polite smile, "if we started with what you've already shared with myself and Mira, to bring the council up to speed, and then move on to what's new."

"Yes," said Less. He disengaged the clasps on his case with a snap and opened it to withdraw several dossiers that he distributed to the table. "If you'll open your files, the first document is a map of the Duchy. The red boundaries show the known Breaches into Arcadia. You'll notice the five major Breaches and several smaller ones. Incursions into the mortal city by Beasts native to the Hedge have been documented, despite my preemptive efforts to eliminate hostile populations nearby." He glanced briefly at Drake. "The subsequent documents are reports detailing surveillance of Richard Muldrow, Autumn Court's Paladin of Shadows. There are photographs of his Masked form entering the Blood Tears club and leaving by the back way shortly after. Unfortunately, the photographs are unable to show that at this point Richard grew wings and took flight. The next series of images are time-stamped photographs of Richard entering the Glasshouse club. The final document is a report of another sighting of Richard in an alley near where we believe he keeps an apartment. Please compare the time on this report with the time of him entering Glasshouse. Even with wings, it is extremely unlikely he could have crossed town in such a short time."

Natalie frowned. "Actual flight in a humanoid is a serious ability, one that bends a mortal's understanding of physics to the breaking point."

Lydia said, "Of greater concern is that he appears to be in two places at once. What are your theories, King Seleman?"

"Classic Fey tactic of misdirection. I propose these are merely illusions and decoys set out to confuse us and waste our resources while we hunt for the real Richard."

Lydia nodded. "That makes sense. Yet, we can't be sure that one of them isn't the real Richard and the Black Key. What are your thoughts, my Queen?"

"It is true the Others' use of illusion and trickery are well known," Rey said as she thought about the situation. "We cannot ignore the fact these doubles may be part of the Key's abilities." She looked at Lydia. "We managed to track down the priestesses who know the Quietus ritual, and they were convinced to help. Much of the knowledge of the Key and its capabilities they had were lost when Cromwell sacked their holdings, or so they claim. Magic cannot be used to try and find it, as it can detect at least one method of doing so,

and I am reluctant to repeat the experience unless we have no other option.

"Likewise, there are ways to determine if any particular Richard is an illusion or not, but any changeling going near it is in immediate danger." Rey did not want to bring up Imogen, but if Less did not, then she would. If Imogen can detect wards, then perhaps she could detect illusions as well - if they were not built upon by the Mask.

"But you could use your familiarity with Richard to determine what is more likely a place he'd be," Mira put in. *"For instance, do you think it likely he would boldly walk into Glasshouse, even though he knows that's a Changeling owned place? Or would he be more likely to lurk near home territory, hoping to bide his time until the final moment when the Key opens the Gates for good and he presumably gets whatever it is the Key promised him."*

"Richard would not go into Glasshouse," Rey said with a quick shake of her head. "The volume of the music is far too loud for his comfort. Staying near a den, so to speak, would be far more in character."

Judd mused. "I don't doubt that you have identified the real Richard Muldrow. But I don't buy this other Richard is an illusion. A trap perhaps, but of what kind?" He shook his head. "I would not discredit your illusion theory, King of Winter. But I offer for thought the possibility the second Richard is a third party. Do you know of another enemy that might lure people close to Richard into a trap?"

"There are any number of possibilities," Less mused. "The most likely is a dragon escaped from Arcadia that bears us a grudge, and it might explain the wings. We have witch allies that are helping us fight the Black Key. I will ask them if they can dispel these possible illusions."

"It might also be some enemy of Richard's," Rey added. "Or some other enemy of mine. The vampire responsible for my kidnapping has yet to be dealt with."

Less recounted, "The multiple Richards could be: illusions or decoys, a capability of the Black Key to be in two places at once, or a trap to lure us in. I suppose we could use some form of divination to narrow it down. If we frame the questions to not mention the Black Key directly we might avoid it's notice."

Judd Gourlay knitted his fingers together and leaned forward on the table. "Very interesting. So, we have multiple threats, vampiric kidnappers -- that's new -- and need of an oracle." He was looking directly at Mira, who was seated directly across from him. "It seems you have the skills we require."

Mira paled. *"There is a steep cost to my ability to see the future."* She hadn't used those abilities in a little while. The most useful one he was mentioning drove her insane to use it. Lately she had been afraid that any more meddling with her mind, even with her own skills, could make her lose her grip on reality permanently.

Lives were in the balance here. The only other option would be to ask the Prophet, Stuart. But his motivations were completely unknown. She couldn't trust the fate of her friends, her family really, to that man. Mira looked around the table starting with Rey and Less and ending with Drake.

"I was referring to using the Prophet," said Less. "He seems to have experience dealing in divination regarding the Black Key." Less also hoped to get more of an idea of what the immortal's capabilities were.

"His services are not free," Rey pointed out. Though, she thought, if the Key could not sense Stuart was anything other than human, the Key's killing the immortal would be a minor inconvenience in the bigger picture of things.

"I would say that is an assumption," responded Less. "The order that keeps him captive are dedicated to finding and capturing the Key. They have offered their help. To me, that includes finding out if we are dealing with illusions or some kind of convoluted trap."

Rey looked at Mira. "You know the Prophet better than we do, and also have a better idea if the priestesses would be willing to help with this right now." Less and the others did not know the deal Mira had made with the Prophet, nor of the situation she'd left behind when she came to the club for the meeting.

"I do, but I don't have a straight yes or no answer. I'll put it this way. This order of priestesses -- some of whom are not your typical mortal but very gifted in terms of magic and knowledge of the occult -- has been trying to decipher his prophecies for centuries. The order of events and their timing is never given. Most importantly, I'm uncertain as to his motivations. I believe he knows far more than he ever discusses. I believe he tells only what he wants known and thus will influence future events to his own ends. The order of priestesses repeatedly warn how dangerous he is.

"I can also tell you he has little regard for his own life or well being. What, then, can we assume he thinks of the rest of the world?" Mira shook her head. "No matter how accurate or detailed his prophecies might actually be, we cannot trust the messenger."

"Then that leaves you," Rey said softly. "And we know what happened to the last person who tried to help is with a divination. If you do this, then we need to make sure you are somewhere safe, that Richard has little or no chance of knowing about."

"Or we can simply deal with all three possibilities of the multiple Richards," jumped in Less. "We can form groups to hunt down each Richard occurrence, taking care to prepare for a possible ambush."

Judd asked, "And if one of the groups encounters the Black Key, how can it be dealt with? It has already taken one of our best, one no one expected would be susceptible to the Key."

"We have enlisted Rover to create a cold iron box to contain the Key, but unless some miracle happens, it won't be ready for a week," Rey said. "The ritual the priestesses has is a song which quiets and calms the Key, making it less dangerous as long as the Key can hear it, and the singers do not miss a syllable or otherwise make a mistake. But there are only two priestesses who know the ritual well enough to pull it off. I do not know if they will be willing to teach it to others. Then there is Mira. Through some powerful magic she acquired, she may be able to handle the Key without being lost to it.

"I will not blindly send someone to their deaths, yet if this is not stopped, the unthinkable will happen." She shifted in her seat, sitting straighter. "I would ask for volunteers from our Court and others, and in co-ordination with King Seleman's Wardens, work to confirm what we can about the Richards, and hopefully without the loss of any more life than necessary."

"Let's walk through this," said Less into the silence that followed the Queen's request for volunteers. "We have a team of volunteers and a winged Richard flutters down nearby. Predictably, a second Richard shows his face to another group. What do they do? Presumably, they contact an agent of the Wardens and file a report and the witches are dispatched with an armed escort to one of the Richards to verify if it is the real Black Key or not. Our reliance on the witches to detect the real Key *and* to perform the Quietus ritual is our bottleneck. If a decoy Richard is a trap, then we risk all by sending the witches out to confirm it. Can we do any better?"

Judd said, "I think the answer to that is 'maybe', if we can obtain reliable intelligence on where exactly the Black Key is before we move. If we can't, we have to check out all options. But before we do anything, we need to have something that can contain the Key."

"Okay," Lydia said. "Let's make sure we are all on the same page. Is everyone here in agreement that we can make no move to capture the Black Key without something ready to contain it?"

Rey nodded.

"Agreed," said Less. "But I would like to know what the Key is doing to prepare for our strike against it in the meantime."

"Aside from getting close to it, I am not certain we can know that," Rey said. "Mira could tell us where it will be at a certain time and date, but we still don't know if it can sense if she does it." She looks at Lydia. "Can you tell us what happened at the parking garage? What your motley did, and how the Key reacted? That might give us some insight into how to deal with it when we catch up to it."

Lydia's voice was cold. "The Key reacted with trickery instead of a show of force. It subverted nearby humans when Veridia began to close in on it and was about to subdue it. It used a simple illusion to trick them into thinking we were harming a child. Richard tried

to stop one of them from taking the Key, thinking they were rescuing that child but touched the Key himself. The moment he did, he was lost to us. He lashed out to escape but didn't stay to kill Veridia. She died of ... complications during transport."

Judd and Natalie frowned, curiosity etching their brows.

"Complications?" Natalie asked.

"It doesn't matter," Lydia snapped.

"No, what matters is that we must also be careful to clear mortals away from the area before engaging the Key." Less didn't want the Council to settle on the complications of Veridia's condition.

"The Key moved to escape," Rey said. "It might try to do so again. A ward of sufficient strength could keep mortals out and the Key in, but the trick will be to ambush it, either through a lure or knowing where it will be when we are ready to attempt to capture it." She thought about what the report said, about how Richard was seen hanging around where he might have an apartment in town. Should she and her motley go check it out? See if it really was him? If it was, would they have a chance to learn more about the Key and its plans?

"What ward, highness?" Natalie asked.

"King Seleman has a contact who has offered to help us," Rey said. "They can create a very powerful ward that can be used to entrap the Key in a specific location, but it requires a short amount of time to set up. When it is up, however, it should be very difficult for the Key to bypass it, and at the same time, it should serve to keep any mortals away from the Key, preventing them from getting too close, or providing the Key with a new host. It will take more than just brute strength to break through it, yet it will not prevent the power of the Quietus ritual from working."

During the entire conversation, Drake had remained quiet, listening to what was being said and allowing his mind to digest it all. Queen Lafitte, he finally said, "I will speak to my king about looking for volunteers to help with any raids you might wish to mount, and for when it's time to go after the Key."

"Do we go after Richard and the Key now to try to contain him, or do we wait a week when the iron box is finished?" Mira asked.

Rey's first instinct was to go to Richard, the one hanging around what might be his apartment and, if it was her Richard, try to win him back from the Key. However, there was far more at stake than her personal happiness. "The more contact we have with the Key, the greater the chance it will escape us, and possible take more of us with it." She shook her head. "Surveillance should be continued until we have the iron box, then we make our move."

Less put his papers back into his case and shut the lid. "Any volunteers we get this week will be put on a rotating security detail to protect Rover while he does his work."

Rey sat back in her chair, a bemused little smile on her face. He didn't think he could boss her around in matters involving her Court, did he? She and the council would decide where best to use any volunteers Drake might be able to get. "Some of them, certainly," she agreed. "Your help in providing intelligence about the Key and the Breaches is greatly appreciated, but Autumn may have other missions that need to be accomplished."

"Very well. My role on this council is concluded. I'll let you get back to Court matters." Less stood and nodded to Rey. "You know how to reach me. I'll keep you informed on Rover's progress." He smiled a goodbye to Mira and departed.

"If you wouldn't mind waiting," Rey said, "there are some things I need to talk with you about."

"I'll be outside, in the bar."

Having already conducted necessary court business, the meeting concluded shortly thereafter. The others filed out, but Mira lingered a little.

Rey heard her saying to Drake, *"I have to go back with them. They don't trust us because we are touched by the Fae, which they know are twisted, evil beings. The deal is I'm their hostage while the motley has use of their priestesses. Once we find the Black Key and can act, they'll bring me to help face Richard and the Key together. Until then, I am to stay at the monastery. But, they never said I couldn't have visitors."* She looked hopefully at Drake.

"If they allow it," Drake replied, and reached out to take Mira's hand. She took his and leaned in close to him.

He raised her hand to her lips and placed a kiss on her knuckles, then followed it with gentle kiss, full of promise.

Mira didn't want to go, but it was time. Her touch lingered on his face as she drew away. After calling a quiet goodbye to Rey, she left before she gave into her newly rekindled attraction to Drake.

After Rey left the room she passed the sisters and their Prophet ward. He said, "I guess it's time to go. You want that ward left up? It can stay until dawn as far as I'm concerned."

"Best take it down," Rey replied. "I'm not sure the owner of this place would appreciate lingering magics."

After Rey finished speaking with the Prophet and the two sisters, Less saw her making her

way around the bar looking for him. He concluded checking and answering his email and made himself known to her.

"I didn't mean to offend you, Less," Rey said in Glymjack Cant as she slipped into the seat next to him. "I do value everything you can do, but I can't let it appear like you can order me around or make decisions for my Court." Her tone was calm and apologetic, and, absurdly, the fact he'd smiled at Mira and not her, hurt her feelings.

"I am not offended," he replied. "But you should also remember that changelings that volunteer to fight the Key will be volunteering for the defense of the Duchy, not to become de facto members of your Court. You may believe that Autumn is the most suited to command the war against the Key but your Black Council has not been vetted by the other Crowns. I support you, and appointing Drake is a stroke of genius, but I do not see Jeremiah Storm, for example, sitting comfortably as you assume command of his warriors. Like it or not, you will find you cannot command volunteers like you can command Autumn courtiers."

"Why do you believe I would think that, let alone attempt to do so?" Rey asked, curious - not angry - about what he'd said.

"Only because you just said that I was questioning you on Court matters when I mentioned tasks for the volunteers."

"You were telling me what all the volunteers I was going to ask for were going to do," Rey replied. "I am not so naive or arrogant as to think I could command everyone who volunteers, if anyone volunteers. I do not feel it necessary to get any other regent's permission and approval for my council, nor do I expect to have any input on how the other regents rule their Courts. Traditionally, it had fallen to Autumn to deal with threats from the Hedge and from the Others. It is not Autumn's time to rule, so I will not presume to be leading the charge. I will, however, be putting Autumn's resources to what they do best - determine the nature of the fey threats the Duchy faces, see if there's a way to close the breaches, discover any other weaknesses the Key might have, and then, present it all to the other regents, along with the box and a plan." Rey sighed and sat back in her seat. "I wish you would have more faith in me, Less." She picked up her drink and swirled the ice cubes around before setting it back down on the table.

"On the contrary, I do have every faith in you. You have the Duchy's best interests at heart and I respect that. I did not leave the Council meeting in a huff, as you seem to think. I am not a member of the Council and my purpose in being there had ended."

"But you weren't happy with me, were you. You smiled goodbye to Mira, but not to me." Rey straightened in her chair. "It's no big deal, really. You're just hard to read sometimes."

"I take that as a high compliment. I simply felt that, in your role as Queen of Autumn, you would not have appreciated any show of familial affection. It was a meeting of a war council, not the Spring follies. My smiling to Mira was more about covering up my social

awkwardness due to the failure of our relationship."

"Why do you let what happened bother you?" Rey asked, curiosity spurring her on.

Less hesitated in answering. "I suppose I am more human than I like to admit. She got under my skin, so to speak."

"More human than you'd like to admit. What's wrong with being human?" Rey asked, puzzled. "It's being human, having a soul, that keeps us from being like Them."

"That's easy for you to say. Elementals have a hard time of it."

Rey shrugged. "All it means is you sometimes have to try harder," she replied.

"Yes, well, in my line of work I seem to get a lot of negative reinforcement that keeps me from getting much practice. I'm sorry you feel left out these days. In my defence, you do not always invite warmth. Between your temper, your businesses, and your Court, there isn't much left over for your friends."

"Businesses? What businesses?" Rey looked at him with a puzzled expression. "I only have my job at the casino - which I don't own, by the way. I have an investment in a gastropub, but I have nothing to do with the day to day running of the place. If you're thinking I'm into anything illegal, you'd better tell your people to check their facts before they come running to you to tell tales. I stopped participating in anything illegal when I became Witch of the Bitter Wind."

Less couldn't prevent a few of his eyes rolling. "Yeah, that's the stuff I'm talking about. Perhaps I chose my words imperfectly. When I say business, perhaps I mean officiousness. You tend to show up and power-suit your interactions. Don't get me wrong - it is very effective at getting your way - but it is a little off-putting to offer up a friendly criticism only to have you slam down a libel suit."

"I'm not sure I understand what you're talking about," Rey replied honestly. "If I did, I'd work on it."

"I think the root problem is your temper," said Less carefully. "You often react hotly to things. Maybe count to five before lashing out?"

Rey just laughed. "Did you know that walking around me like you're on eggshells, or treating me like I'm some unstable explosive, is one of the things that makes angers me the most, especially if the people doing it are people I share a motley pledge with." She picked up her glass, showing no signs of being the slightest bit annoyed, let alone angry. "No, I can understand you being... concerned. I won't say you're afraid of me, because that would be insulting. You have been the target of my anger. However, you should be pleased to know the last time I raised my voice, or did anything in anger, was when I found you in Mira's room." Her voice wasn't accusatory; she was merely stating a fact. "I

haven't so much as even sworn at a piece of furniture I stubbed my toe on.

"I know that people are aware of my temper, and that they'll use it against me if they can. All I can say is that I am working on keeping on an even keel. Counting to five, trying to let things just wash over me rather than let I run into me like a brick wall."

"Okay, we'll leave it at that then," said Less. "I have places to be so I'll say good night. I'll see you soon."

"Good night, Less," Rey replied.

Rey sat in her car in the mall parking lot, looking at her phone. Less' report about Chase having engaged a few of the creatures from the Breaches kept going through her head. She finally sighed and gave in, dialing his cell phone number.

"Well hello, Miss Lafitte," answered an unfamiliar female voice. "We haven't spoken in ages."

Rey was surprised, but didn't let it phase her. "I'm afraid I don't recognize your voice." She hoped the woman was Chase's mate, or if not, that he wasn't in big trouble.

"It's Kiera," she said, as if that would remind Rey who she was. An uncomfortable moment passed. "I used to work for you? You had a hostess service for a while and..."

Rey heard the phone shift hands. "Hi, Rey." This time it was Chase's voice.

She was very glad she wasn't talking to them face to face, because her cheeks were now burning. "Hi, Chase. I hope I'm not calling at a bad time."

"Nah. I just got back from a bounty this afternoon. Kiera and me were just having a drink, is all. What's up?"

She'd hoped he'd been alone. "Is there somewhere there you can talk where you won't be overheard by her? There's something I need to talk to you about that she probably ought not to hear."

"No problem." He muffled the phone with his hand. "Hey Kier, do you mind running and getting us some drinks? I think we just have one beer left in the fridge."

Rey heard Kiera say something about expecting to take a nap, but Chase said, "There's a hundred on the kitchen counter. Take it and get us something." His tone didn't encourage argument.

A minute later, Chase said, "Okay. She's gone."

"I appreciate that, Chase," Rey said, her voice softening a bit. She took a shallow breath, then continued. "I hear you've had some run-ins with some... things, near your apartment, or rather that alley a block down. Are you okay?"

Chase laughed. "Me? Fine. Thanks for asking. Weird shit going on around town lately, though. I had to tell Kiera to take the long way around when she goes to the store or downtown. I take it you know something about it."

Rey's embarrassment flared, and she felt hurt that he'd laughed at her concern, but it went away just as fast when she reminded herself that he was just like that. "Yes. It's why I called. Remember what I showed you through that door at my house, the one that led to the thorn-lined path?" She remembered it vividly. She'd opened the Door to the Hollow and stepped through, and he saw what she looked like behind her Mask. It hadn't phased him one bit. In fact, he had been rather enthusiastic afterward. The memory brought a smile to her face.

"How could I forget?" he said warmly. "That led to one of my fondest memories."

"Me too," she said, hoping he hadn't heard the words she murmured under her breath. In a stronger voice, she continued. "Something is in Mythic, breaking down the barriers between here, and the place that path led, and all kinds of dangerous creatures are coming through and setting up housekeeping here."

"I was wondering about that. Thanks for the heads up. Is there anything that makes for a more effective defense against these things?"

"What you are gives you some protection. What did you end up fighting? Can you describe it to me, and where you and it tangled?"

He gave her the location. "It was kind of like you, in your wolf form, but not so cute and it tended to rear up on its hind legs a lot. It tasted like meat, though, just like any other animal."

Rey couldn't help but chuckle at the cute comment, but then sobered quickly. "You encountered something called a briarwolf. Very dangerous, and they can be very smart.

Not something you want to be hunted by," she said, speaking from personal experience.

"They are very territorial, so your best bet is just to keep out of its way. It can't go very far from the Breach, or the lack of fey magic in this world will kill it. If you have to fight it, do it fast and hard, and watch out because they hunt in packs. Their favorite food is human flesh, so anyone walking by that alley, or even unfortunate enough to walk down into it, is likely to be their next meal."

"Yeah. Sort of noticed that. But look, this thing showed up down the street from me. That's my turf. They're messing with things here, so I'm going to keep killing them until they take

the hint. Unless things get worse, in which case I'll pull up stakes and head to Chaska's territory. I let the local pack know, too. They're young but good kids."

"It's taken over my home too," Rey said roughly. "My friends and I, my entire Court, is working to find a way to stop it from getting worse." She paused for a second, then forged ahead with the thought that had come to mind, though she knew it was probably be rejected. "Listen. Do you trust me? Trust me enough to let me work my magic and give you some protection from these things. Give you the ability to see the danger?"

"You told me nothing comes free. What's this going to cost me?"

"A promise not to tell anyone but me and those who can also see through the Mask, and a small taste of your emotions." Rey knew she would likely regret the last, but what choice did she have? She needed to gather as much Glamour as she could, be as full of it as possible, in case she and her motley had to fight - or flee.

"Can I turn it off? Honestly, I'm not too worried about what the critters might look like. But frankly you got friends that will either spoil me for other women or give me nightmares. Some things I don't want to see."

"Normally it can't be turned on and off, but I think I can make that happen," Rey said. "In any case, it wouldn't last forever. It will wear off in a couple of weeks."

"I can see them for what they are in their little hidey-holes and when they come out they maybe don't look as weird, but they steam, bubble and burn. Kinda obvious to me anyway. You sure it's worth the trouble?"

"It will help you see where there is a breach," Rey replied, "and if you go too far into one, you may never be able to find your back. You'd be like a human stuck in Shadow. Helpless against the magic of that place, and no power to be able to open a door back." She shook her head. "I don't want that to happen to you," she said softly.

"What? Well, if this thing will help me find my way back if I get stuck in their little alley hideout, I'll take it."

"No, it won't help you find your way out," Rey replied sadly. "Even if I were to go in there and lose site of this world, I'd be lost there too. I just thought... Nevermind." She felt tears form in her eyes and start to slide down her cheeks. "It was a stupid idea. So, are you and Kiera a couple?"

"Uh, what? Oh hey, it still sounds like it would be useful in case a new one of these Breach things pops up," he said amicably. "Then I could avoid it better."

"Kiera?" He seemed baffled for a moment. "Oh! Oh hell. I'm sorry Rey. No, we aren't a couple. She's sort of my roommate. She just showed up one day wandering around here. I found out later that whatever job she was trying for didn't work out and she was going to

try prostitution. Crap. I didn't need to say that. I'm about as sensitive as a cactus. Kiera and I are, ah. Friendly. She's a... well she just turned out to be compatible. I didn't want her wandering around doing that sort of thing.

"I guess I sort of picked up a stray, is all. She's nice enough, and we share a bed from time to time, but it's nothing real. Neither one of us thinks it's anything more than what it is."

His explanation made her feel better, and she wanted to kick herself for it. "She's a wolfblood, then. If I'm going to place the protection on you, then we'll need to meet face to face. I'm at Westlinger Mall right now, and I have some business I have to take care of tonight. She glanced at her watch. "Could we meet at, say, Corazon in about an hour?"

Rey looked over at the strip mall, and wondered if Chase knew of it. It was stores mostly geared toward women, a salon, a small bank branch, a store that sold clothes appropriate for office wear, and three lingerie shops. Not that she had any intention of going into any of the latter. Except, maybe, to get some nylons or stockings.

"On second thought, it probably ought to be somewhere fewer people might be watching. There's a park a couple blocks down from Corazon that's not very busy this time of day. We could meet there. Unless you have an objection?"

"Could we do it in the morning?"

"Sure," Rey replied. "I'm sorry. I tend to forget that other people do have social lives, or plans for the evenings. I'm staying in Santa Fe, but it wouldn't be a problem to drive back to Mythic to meet you. What time and where? I'll even pay for breakfast."

Her remark concerned Chase. It sounded like she was saying she didn't have a personal life of her own anymore, and last he knew she was dating Richard. "Breakfast? Sounds great! There's this cafe adjacent to the train station. Same building, in fact. Why don't you stop at my place around eleven and we'll walk over. It will give me a chance to point out that Breach if you want."

"Breakfast at eleven? Sounds more like lunch to me." Rey chuckled. "I'll see you tomorrow. If... If something happens and I can't make it, I'll do my best to let you know. And will you give my apologies to Kiera for not recognizing her voice? Things have been crazy for me lately, and it's got me kind of distracted."

"It's not a problem," he said. "Oh, about Kiera, can you do me a favor and not mention her to Chaska or Lyla? It didn't set right with me that she was going to sell her body for money. I wouldn't feel much better if Storm Front decided they needed to 'adopt' her. Pack's short on wolfbloods since the war, and even shorter on females." He hoped she understood. He wasn't trying to be selfish. He just didn't think the typical werewolf view of wolfbloods as objects to be passed around or possibly taken as mates -- whether the wolfblood liked it or not -- was right.

"What goes on outside their territory doesn't really concern them all that much," Rey

replied. "Unless it's the Pure. Don't worry, I won't say anything."

"Thanks, Rey. I appreciate that."

"No problem. See you tomorrow morning."

Just before a quarter to eleven, Rey walked around the corner onto the street Chase's apartment was on. She'd parked her car in a lot about half-way between Chase's apartment and the train station. Her car may not be very attractive to thieves, but she didn't want to invite anything to happen to it. She may not live in that neighborhood, but she hadn't forgotten how dangerous it could be, even before the Breaches started appearing in the city.

She'd woken up that morning feeling positive, far more so than she'd had for a long time, and she chose to dress appropriately. A short skirt that swished pleasingly around her thighs as she walked, high heeled ankle boots, and a leather jacket, under which she wore tight stretch knit blouse in a brilliant autumn crimson that suited her in both fae mien and Mask. Rey'd pulled some of her hair off her face and back into a tiny, ornate black comb and left the rest to hang loose, framing her face and falling just past her shoulders.

Chase's apartment door was open and he could be seen inside lounging with his feet up on a little breakfast table staring at a magazine. The side Rey could see from the doorway showed an advertisement for vodka.

To his left sat what must be Kiera, the woman that answered the phone when Rey called last night. She was a dark-eyed woman with dark, shoulder-length brown hair. She was seated as casually as Chase, with her feet up on his lap.

He looked up and grinned. "Morning Rey," he said, dropped the magazine on the table. Kiera looked up, too. A smile on her lips quickly faded as Rey entered the apartment. She watched Rey warily.

"Morning, Chase," Rey replied with a smile. "Hello, Kiera." She nodded at the woman in greeting, and made no move to get any closer, wondering if she might spook her. "I hope I'm not too early," she said to Chase. "Not interrupting your morning literature break?" She gave him a little amused grin, as if Hustler was so challenging a read..

"Nah. I was just waiting for you." He patted Kiera's feet and she swung them down off his lap.

Kiera put the bowl of shredded wheat she'd been holding on the table and managed a small wave at Rey. She didn't seem inclined to talk to Rey now that she was here in person. Feeling intimidated by Rey, she just hunched over her breakfast and tried to ignore

the changeling.

Chase noticed and Rey saw his eyes go from Rey to Kiera and back. He didn't say anything, though, but just stood up and said, "I think we should go. Now is a good time because it should be just ahead of the lunch rush." He grinned again. "And that means fresher food and no wait."

"Let's get moving then," Rey agreed, deciding not to say anything to Kiera and make the situation worse. She turned and left the apartment first, wanting to put some distance between her and Chase's roommate for Kiera's sake, and because she knew how much he liked to watch her ass as she walked. She'd hadn't felt admiring eyes on her for a while, and it was a nice change. Might as well give him a bit of a reward, knowing what might be coming later.

An arm caught her around the waist when she'd made it half way down the hall. It turned her around and she found herself close enough to smell Chase's aftershave. "Hey, how about a hug for an old friend?"

Rey chuckled. "Sure, why not." She put her arms around him and hugged him, tightening the embrace just enough that he knew she was glad to see him, but not so much as to give him any other ideas - or at least that was her plan.

He hugged her nicely, though when they broke apart, she'd noticed his hand had begun roving southward. He had a playful look in his eye when she glanced up at him, but he managed to behave himself the rest of the way out of the apartment and up half a block to the train station café.

Chasing Fire was right; there were hardly any people there at this time. They were able to place their orders and find their seat without a problem. Chase chose a table near the corner next to a window.

"I'm impressed," Rey said with a smile. "I'm wearing what was one of your favorite skirts, and you didn't try and figure out what I'm wearing underneath. Living with Kiera has done wonders for you." Her smile became a friendly, teasing grin.

"I'm trying to be good," he said. His tone was of only mock seriousness. "It takes a lot of effort. Kiera isn't as good an influence as you might guess."

"I have no illusions as to the how much she influences you," Rey replied. "I do appreciate the effort, though." She glanced around the room, noting the couple that had entered the cafe after she and Chase had decided to sit as far from her table as they could. "I do regret I made Kiera uncomfortable. I'd thought who she was might give her some measure of protection from my nature, but I was wrong. I've... changed since we saw each other last."

"Yeah," he said. "Something under the surface."

“Not so much under the surface as hidden from non-fey eyes. Doesn’t bother you all that much, does it.” Rey gave him a wry smile.

“I deal with a whole lot of scary people,” Chase said with a shrug. “After a while, you note it, but it doesn’t have to rule you. I’m actually a bit surprised that Kiera noticed. Some people will be oblivious to the subtler things, but she realized there was something different about you right off.”

“True. I’d think, though, that if I put a concerted effort into trying to frighten you, you’d take it as a challenge.” She chuckled. “And on the subject of effort, shall we see about that little bit of protection I offered you in place?”

“Sure. Well, actually, I’m rather unclear on how exactly this is going to help me with anything, much less protect me. If you are asking for something as a favor, that’s different.”

“I care about you, Chase, and I don’t want you to get hurt,” Rey said. “If you can see where the danger is, where the smaller Breaches are, then you can avoid them, or at least know what you’re getting into.” She met his gaze, both sorry and glad that she’d finally admitted aloud that she did, but she wondered if he sensed she was telling the truth, but still holding something back.

He smiled a when she told him she cared. “Well, that’s the thing. The weird thing. Everyone seems to avoid the breaches except me and the things that come out of them. When I go to the breach, I can see what things are just fine. I know what’s there and that it’s not the normal world. Will this thing you do give me some armor or extra pointy teeth or something? Because just seeing it, I think, I got covered.”

“I could give you almost anything your heart desired,” Rey said. “But the more you get out of it, the higher the cost. Now, I could pay the extra from my own power, but it’s like Essence. I’d need help getting it back. Or I could word it all so that it all balances out. It’s up to you.”

“Is there something in this for you?”

“I won’t lie to you,” Rey replied. “I will get something out of it. Nothing that will give me power over you or anyone you care about. I’d planned on asking you to do a couple things for me, like tell me when you find a new breach or encounter something that came out of one. And greet me like you did at the apartment, with a friendly hug, or a genuine how are you doing if we’re talking over the phone or by email. Keep my secrets, so not talk to people about what you see and know unless they already know about my world. Doing those things will get me a bit of power, recharge my magical battery, so to speak. I have to tell you, though, that if we go through with the agreement and not keep up our own end of the bargain, the deal is off and you’d lose everything I got you through the pledge.”

Chase thought about it, then said, “Okay. I’ll do it, but I don’t want to see changelings for

what they really are. I'm in for the rad faerie powers, though, especially if that'll make hunting faeries down and killing them easier."

"You don't even want to see me?" Rey asked, only half in jest. She could understand why he didn't want to see her kind for what they really are; they could be strange and terrifying to behold.

"I love seeing you as the beautiful human being you really are. Not what some monster has done to you. If that means looking at an illusion, I'm fine with it because that illusion is more you than what you showed me at your house last fall."

Rey felt a little tug at her heart, and a tiny but heartfelt smile graced her lips. "That's one of the nicest things anyone has said to me in a long time. It's hard to remember that when all I can see in the mirror is what He did to me."

Chase smiled, suddenly glad he brought it up. Truth was, he'd been a little worried she'd think him shallow. Maybe he was, a little, but he liked the Rey he saw, that's all. "Well, you're welcome. People should say it more often."

What he just said reminded her of something else, but she'd bring it up after getting the pledge in place. She just let her smile widen, and she paused to think for a moment, going over the new wording of the pledge in her head to make sure it was to her liking.

"Okay, the rad fairy powers I'm giving you come from what's called a pledge. What you get and what you have to do is spelled out. If you agree, I put a bit of my power into it and then it's done. Really simple. You ready?"

"Hit me," he said.

If Chase could have seen through Rey's Mask, he might have been a bit concerned. For a moment, all movement of her wisps stopped, and they all focussed directly - intently - on him. "I'll make your teeth sharper, and give you a little something to make it harder for anyone to hurt you, and it'll last for one Moon. In return, you promise to keep my secrets, tell me when you find a new breach or when you encounter something that came into this world through one, and greet me with a smile, a caring word or touch whenever we talk to each other, either face to face, by phone, or whatever. If you don't do those things, it'll come back and bite you in the ass. Is it a deal?" She offered him her hand, and he couldn't see her nightshade colored claws extending, or her brambles shifting down to loop around her hand.

He took her hand. "Deal."

She closed her hand around his and her claws and thorns bit into his skin, drawing blood from his hand and forearm, but his werewolf nature healed the tiny scratches almost instantly. "I'm honored that you trust me enough not to question the pledge," she said, not releasing his hand. "But please, don't ever say thank you to me, or any other fey being."

"Ow! Hey." He looked at his hand, but there was nothing to be seen. "You need to trim your nails or something." He leaned back in his chair and grinned at Rey. "I know what I'm doing. How else am I going to get you back in my life? I know you fairy types like to hang on words, expression or not. And I heard you way back when you warned me about that. I did it on purpose."

Rey looked at him, searching his face for a sign of what he was up to, but she couldn't get anything beyond that grin. "You don't need trickery, or the pledge, to get me back in your life, Chase." She released his hand, making sure not to scratch him this time. "Life has been very difficult for me since last fall, and it's only going to get busier. I've been cut off from the people around me, especially the ones I care about, for far too long. I'm trying to change that. I need to change that." She shook her head, and watched her wisps, invisible to him, circle and chase each other around his head and chest before darting away and disappearing. "I'm not going to let past fears ruin my future." She looked at him very directly. "I'm sure what I wore today was a pretty good announcement on that." The last time few times they'd met, she'd dressed conservatively, dressing in such a way as to downplay her looks and not give him any kind of encouragement. She'd known full well the clothes she'd chosen that morning, that while they're weren't an invitation, they definitely weren't a blatant warning to keep away.

"Are you saying you and Richard are..." He let her fill in the blank.

"I don't know what we are," Rey replied. "After he and I got together, things got serious. And then he got a new job as a bodyguard working nights, and I've got that job at the casino. It was easier for me to rearrange my schedule once in a while, but his boss was very controlling, and demanding a lot of his time. We hardly saw each other." Rey tucked a loose lock of hair behind her ear. "And now he's been taken by the thing that's creating the breaches, like a spirit can possess and ride a human. My friends and I have a plan, but I don't know if it will work. If he'll survive... intact. But I love him, and I promised myself I wouldn't give up on him."

"I'm sorry about Richard," Chase said. "I can see why you chose him. You need something serious and he could give that to you. I hope you can save him."

Rey smiled and thanked him with a nod. "Not that what you and I had, however brief, isn't worth remembering." Her smile deepened. "They were some good times."

"I'd do it again in a heartbeat." He suddenly looked ashamed. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said that, what with Richard being in trouble and all. I don't mean to try to flirt with you or take Richard's place. I'm just..." He would have said, "being honest" but decided at the last moment that wasn't much better.

Rey's smile turned affectionate, and she reached out to give his hand a gentle squeeze. "No offense taken. In fact, I'm a bit flattered. It's nice to be reminded I'm desirable."

"Good. Then when we meet and I give you a caring touch on the ass, I hope you remember I'm just reminding you that you are desirable." He grinned roguishly.

Rey laughed, a sound both wicked and seductive at the same time. A brief draft of air caused her exotic scent to waft over him, and the smile on her face was one he'd seen before: pleasure and satisfaction. "Let's finish up here, and then head back toward the apartment."

"You got it."

Later he brought Rey over to the breach, just two blocks away and around a corner. He was nervous about, saying he'd been through here just last night and chased off another wolf-thing but that there had been plenty of time for it to come back.

At least for the time they were there, they saw no sign of hedge creatures big enough to be an obvious danger. The Hedge was definitely there, lurking in the dark of the alley like the deepest heart of an old, angry forest. It stared at them with hateful intensity the entire time they poked around, but nothing came at them.

That gave Chase more than enough opportunity -- probably more than he wanted -- to see Rey's fae mien. As they left the breach together, he finally remarked, "You've changed."

"For better or worse?" Rey asked with a wry grin. She expected his answer to be something along the lines of just different, but he'd surprised her before.

"You tell me," he said.

She shrugged. "If I had a choice, I wouldn't do what gave me the white hair again. The rest? Doesn't mean much to anyone but other fey beings, as it reflects my gaining in power and favor with my Court. And the crown," Rey said, gesturing briefly over her head. "Well, it makes me Queen Lafitte of the Ashen Throne, ruler of the Court of Fear." She looked at him. "Doesn't really change who I am, what you think of me, does it?"

"I'm not sure I really know what it means to be queen of a feeling. So... no?"

Rey smiled and closed the distance between them, and linked her arm with his. "What it all basically means is I am one of the four leaders of all the changelings in Mythic. With great power comes great responsibility, and so on. If I'm going to have a life outside of my day job or my responsibilities for helping my people, I'm going to have to make sure it happens." She leaned in a bit closer, wondering if he thought about what he saw of her, and the fact he couldn't sense any of it now, except the scent of the flowers in her hair. "Can I count on you to help out once in a while?"

He nodded. "Haven't I always when you call?" He smiled. He was always up for a challenge. And it wasn't as if he was on speed dial or anything -- she only ever called if there was a serious problem.

"You could call me once in a while," Rey replied, and gently poked his arm. "I know you can dial a phone, and it's not like you don't have my number. That reminds me. I got the birthday card you sent. It's in my keepsake box with other things that are important to me."

"So, you want me to call." He smiled mischievously. "Maybe you aren't a lost cause for me to pursue after all."

"Promises, promises," Rey joked back, knowing that, in his own way, he respected her. While he would be more than willing to become lovers again, they both knew it probably wouldn't happen. "You were an amazing lover, and I'm glad to call you a friend. Of course I want you in my life." She leaned in, intending to press a kiss on his cheek.

Mistaking her intent somewhat, he turned and captured her lips. He drew her tight against him.

Rey didn't resist, and while she returned the kiss, it was with love, not lust or growing passion. She did, however, take advantage of the situation to take just a sip of his emotions to recover some of the Glamour she'd been spending recently. The echoes of his pleasure flowed over her and restored a small amount of her power.

When they parted, he smiled. "Well that gives us something to think about. Try to keep out of trouble. I'll call you."

Rey sent Less a note written in the motley's secret language telling him what she'd learned about the breach in Belle Park, and that Chase was keeping an eye on it for her. If he contacted her with any information, she'd be sure to pass it along as soon as she could.

A week passed.

Changelings of the Duchy began working together with great cooperation. For now, even the various regents were putting aside rivalries and petty concerns for the sake of saving the world from its first true invasion from Faerie in thousands of years. Teams of volunteers were enlisted to track Breaches and the most specialized and trusted changelings monitored Richard.

Although "Richard" was also sighted several other times around the city, there was always one "Richard" near his apartment. The orders were to monitor and not approach. Admirably, no one tried to be a hero. All waited for the iron box to be completed. It almost seemed as if the Black Key was waiting, too. It grated at nerves to think that the Black Key

and the Bearer looked forward to the confrontation as much as the motley of Autumn and Winter did.

But a week had passed and now Less had in his hand an exquisitely made box of solid, cold-forged iron. It was already oxidized with a black coating to slow rusting. There were no welds in case that might prove a weakness the Key could take advantage of; it was put together with iron rivets that were likewise hand-made of iron and pounded into place. The internal latch was heavy. Rover had taped it down so it wouldn't be accidentally latched because, as the little wizened gnome warned Less, once latched, it could not be opened again from the outside without destroying the iron box.

His sources told him that the Key Bearer still lurked near Richard's apartment, and he knew that Queen Lafitte would know that, too. Mira and her human keepers awaited his call to bring her forth, and the two priestesses on loan to the motley waited in Mira's apartment.

His next phone call would set in motion events that would either save the world from slavery to the Fae, or it would put an end to the evil plan -- whoever it was -- for good.

That call went to the Queen of Autumn and Chair of the Black Council. Once she knew the box was ready she could quickly assemble the strike forces to deal with the Richards. His next calls would be to Vicissitude, Septimus Snow and Katey Bacon. He didn't want a winged Richard dropping on top of him without some sort of backup while he transported the box across town.

Rey contacted the other regents, followed by the Black Council, and informed them the box was ready. She then dressed with care, wearing the clothes she knew her Richard liked, and the necklace he'd given her glowed with inner hedgelight as it lay against her skin, level with her heart.

Mira, being a member of the Black Council and therefore alerted by Queen Lafitte, informed her keepers that the time was at hand. Most of the priestesses, Keepers of the Key, piled into cars and took her to the area of Richard's apartment.

On the way, Mira called Remy and warned him that tonight he must make certain the people he cared for were out of harms way and that he should stay away from the address she gave him. She also told him that if he didn't hear from her again that night, that she was sorry but it was goodbye.

Changelings and others began to converge on the location. By an hour after sunset, everything seemed to be in place. The leaders of the plan met in a nearby house -- the abandoned and rundown home once owned by Richard and Betty Muldrow, in fact.

Imogen was there, but she had been unable to set up a ward around Richard in advance because he never was seen to move from this location. She turned to Less for instruction.

"The plan is to first determine if the Black Key is in fact present," explained Less. "Rey will use her connection with Richard to distract him while Mira determines if he has the Key. Once we know this isn't all a set-up, then we'll keep Richard occupied while you put your ward in place."

Mira nodded. "I'm ready when you are Rey -- Queen Lafitte."

A little smile quirked Rey's lips, and then she nodded. "Let's get this over with." She took a deep breath and headed for the door.

Less checked his sword in his umbrella and put on his hat. He held open the door for the women, tipping his hat to them as they passed. This one was for Veridia.

As Mira stepped outside, her phone gave off a little alert that she'd received a text message. When she checked to see who it was, she saw it was from Drake.

I cannot be with you in person, but know my heart is. Come back to me.

Mira smiled, clutching the phone for a moment, then put it away and let Rey take the lead. Rey knew the last report was that Richard lurked in the alley behind the apartment, so that was where she needed to go.

Mira followed her to the alley entrance, then staggered, catching the wall before she fell.

Rey thought she saw the gleam of eyes somewhere in the deep shadows and a bit of red flannel as light from the street bounced off someone. She stopped where she was and, ready to get the hell out of the way should she be attacked, called out "Richard?"

There was no reply.

Mira was behind her so Rey didn't see as she slowly slid to the ground. But Less did. Mira was looking back at him with wide, terrified eyes. He couldn't hear her but her lips read, "It's not Richard".

Less hurried to Mira's side as she stumbled and clutched at her as she lay on the ground. "Rey, get back! Something's not right!" To Mira he asked, "Is the Key here?" It had to be, to affect her like this. Mira nodded, her eyes going skyward.

Meanwhile, the shape Rey saw hiding in the alley stepped out. It was Richard, dressed in his favorite flannel shirt, jeans, and boots. He made no sound but stared straight through Rey. She was uncertain if the whooshing sound she was hearing was her own heart blood rushing through her ears.

Less sent a quick pre-prepared text to Worm. It was the signal that the Key was present. She would tell Imogen and the priestesses. He stayed crouched near Mira, warily

watching Richard and Rey.

Oh crap, Rey thought. She kept her eyes on Richard, and backed away slowly. No sudden movements, she tells herself. Maybe it is Mira's presence he senses. He doesn't seem to recognize me, but at least he's not being hostile.

"Rey!" whispered Less. "We have to engage with him."

"Richard?" Rey said again. "Are you okay?"

Richard faded away to nothing.

Then a sudden thump caused Less and Rey to nearly jump out of their skins. Between Mira (and Less) and Rey, a massive minotaur-monster had landed. He must have jumped from the roof of one of the two buildings that hemmed in the alley. The shorter of the two was five stories tall.

The distance he must have jumped was quickly forgotten in the face of the terror that now stood before them. This being was a huge, nine-foot tall creature that might once have been a minotaur. It was still had hooves and horns. But his frame was all out of proportion. Arms and chest were massive - measured in feet, not inches, but his waist was absurdly narrow. His skin was a nearly translucent grey and from where they stood they could see black veins pulsing in his neck.

They'd witnessed the effect the Black Key had on its bearers before. There was no mistaking it now. Only, this Richard had no wings. Instead he was clad in his enchanted armor and wielded his legendary battle axe. As Rey watched, he touched the bracer on his right wrist and further armor, of Rey's own magical creation, enveloped him as well.

Richard's red eyes seemed insane but yet he spoke as he looked around from Rey to Mira and Less. "So. You brought me the vampire-loving wench. Good." His voice sounded hollow and huge, like it came from loudspeakers at a stadium instead of a living person.

He began swinging the massive axe, loosening up his shoulders as he walked toward Mira and the Winter King.

Less used his umbrella to help himself stand up and put himself between Richard and Mira. "Richard," he said as mildly as he could. "Remember how Mira helped your ex-wife, Betty?"

Rey stayed where she was for a moment, then slowly followed Richard. She had no idea what she'd do, but if Richard did attack, she didn't think anyone could take him down.

Mira had sunk to the ground. This close to the Key, she would very soon be overwhelmed and lose consciousness, but she managed to do one thing first. Less was buying them time, and she couldn't let that go to waste. The priestesses needed to get here and begin the

Ritual of Quiescence if they were to have any chance. She stretched out a hand back in the direction they'd come and managed with fading awareness, to wave for them to come forward. Hopefully their backup would see and understand.

Then Mira took a shuddering breath as another unwelcome convulsion ripped through her body. In this moment, she could let go her fear and take the leap of faith that would allow the Ice Princess to come forward and do what must be done. It wasn't easy. She feared permanently losing herself to the Ice Princess even more than dying under Richard's axe.

But with a sigh, she let go.

Richard hesitated. "Betty. *They* took Betty from me. They made her a slavish addict, poisoned her soul. They must all be punished for what they do to innocent folk. They must be sent back to the graves from which they escaped."

"Richard," Rey said from behind, hoping she was out of reach of a broad swing of the axe. "And what about me? Mira has saved my life, far too many times that I can count. Will you murder my friend? Make me lose both my Legate, even as I lose you, the man I love and who would be my Paladin of Shadows" She let her love for him fill her voice, and hoped she still mattered to Richard.

Richard stilled his ax and turned the opposite way, to look at Rey. This was good timing because Less felt the icy cold of Mira's transformation into the Ice Princess next to him. Had he looked, Less would have seen there was nothing of Mira in those crystal-blue eyes and flesh of fresh crystal-clear ice. The Ice Princess seemed to be rapidly gaining an understanding of the situation as she silently rose to her feet.

Less was not surprised when he felt her icy touch on his shoulder. She whispered, "We must not allow him to retain the axe. If he swings it, someone will die." There was absolute conviction in her voice. She was stating fact, not a matter for debate. If Richard swung that weapon at someone with his current strength and power, that person would be dead. Less suddenly understood what a huge risk he'd taken by getting between Richard and Mira, and how likely it was he'd just saved her life. "We must subdue him -- he has the Key on his person somewhere. The Ice Queen requires us to retrieve it for her."

"Murder?" Richard was saying to Rey. "No," he said hesitantly. "She does not deserve to die. But she doesn't understand. She was already lost once. She must not continue her relations with them. They will use her and take her away, too."

"Then we need to help her see that," Rey said. "And to protect her. Running around, hunting down vampires will only draw attention to us, and will eventually lead to war, between the Duchy and the vampires in and around Mythic and Santa Fe. We could lose everything. Richard, I don't want to lose you."

"War is necessary. War is how we will make them stop. When the Gates are fully opened, they will be helpless before our power. We will have the strength to do what must be

done. No more will they be able to hide in the darkness. No more will they be able to take and destroy what they please.

"You can't stop it, Rey."

Rey began to hear the thoughts bubbling to the surface of her mind. With the Gates open, Autumn could rule. Fear would run rampant. As Queen of Autumn she could protect all the changelings and no more would there remain the doubts and uncertainties of a shared rule. The fear and panic the Gates would cause would lend her the power to stand against even the Keepers and preserve Mythic for all changelings. It would not be a new Arcadia on Earth. It would be the Great Refuge -- a haven for all changelings that recognized her wisdom and strength. She could provide for them, and get revenge for the wrongs inflicted upon them by the Keepers.

Less had no idea how he could take Richard's axe away. Perhaps Niveanne could trap it in ice or cause it to shatter on the ground but he didn't want to anger Richard. He was more concerned about Rey. He could see the confusion on her face. He worried that the Key was trying to take control of her. To distract it, he called out again. "Richard! You would open the Gates to destroy the vampires. What about us? The Hedge is too dangerous for mere changelings. You would see Rey, and Claire, and Peaches, and Freddy, and Owen, and Mona killed or enslaved again? What about the mortals? They are helpless and innocent in this war. You would wipe out all the little mortal children? War is hell, man!"

Richard turned back toward Less. "We will adapt," he rumbled with a vague shrug.

When he saw Niveanne the Ice Princess, his eyes narrowed. He began to shout, "You've brought --"

In that moment Niveanne acted, stepping close to the giant minotaur and stabbing upward with her hand, aiming for his chest. An icy spear jetted upward. Richard stepped back quickly, but couldn't avoid all of the attack. She ripped a jagged gash through his armor and across his chest. "Disarm him! Now!" Niveanne ordered. "I will lead him where he must go."

Rey moved a few steps back, getting out of the way. "I'm not strong enough." Less, meanwhile, called forth his contracts of Stone and Air. Wrapped in a cloak of fog, he stabbed at Richard's hand with the iron point of his umbrella. It punctured his hand and the battle axe slipped from his grip.

Roaring in pain, Richard turned, lowered his horns and gored Less, opening him up from stem to stern and sending him flying back out of the alley.

Niveanne stepped back, toward Less but facing Richard. She would not allow the Black Key to destroy the Winter King. She called upon Autumn to steal Richard's strength, though he mostly shook off her effort.

For Less, the world was rapidly going dark when he felt a warm hand on his chest. Looking up, he saw Imogens worried and horrified face looking anxiously back down at him. "Stay with me, Less," he thought he heard her say. Then something happened and the darkness receded. The pain was still there, which reminded him in a very acute way that he was still alive. "You're safe now."

The two priestesses were standing just behind Imogen and they began to sing.

Rey said, "I'm sorry, Richard," and leaped at him, her fingernails morphing into long claws as she slashed at him. The brave attack caught him by surprise. Her claws opened vessels in his neck. Blood rained down his chest. Weakened, he fell first to one knee. He failed to regain his feet and fell over onto his side, then rolled to his back. His eyes were closed and he was bleeding heavily.

"Less, where's the box," Rey said, doing her best to keep her emotions under control. "We need to get the Key off off him. Now." She looked at the wounds she'd torn in his neck. "If we can stop the bleeding in time..." Rey stood over him, wanting so much to reach out and touch him, to hold him, but she couldn't, not until she knew for sure the Key was safely in the box. She wanted to go down on her knees and weep, to wail at her loss, but she couldn't do that either. Not with so many people watching, and the job wasn't finished yet. Too much left to do, so she would grieve later, in private with those she cared about.

"It's here," Less gasped. "I gave it to the priestesses..." He tried to sit up and help but Imogen gently held him down and he gave in easily.

"Somebody bring it here." Rey couldn't just stand there and watch Richard bleed to death any longer. She dropped to her knees. "Stay with me, Richard," she murmured. "You're not allowed to die. Do you hear me?" She tore a large piece off the bottom of her shirt, bunched it up and pressed it hard against the wounds in his neck, trying to stop the bleeding.

Worm, on hand to support the needs of the priestesses, and Claire, who was waiting to see if she would be required to help Richard fight the control of the Key, jumped forward and jogged the iron box into the alley together.

It only took Rey a moment to realize she wasn't going to be able to keep Richard from bleeding out. She desperately wanted to save him, but she couldn't think just about herself. Her decision could affect the entire world. She didn't want him to die like this, but she couldn't let him live that way either. When the Key had succumbed to the ritual, its hold over Richard hadn't faded. The best thing she could do was to let him die with dignity, with the Key locked away.

"Imogen," she asked, still holding the blood soaked rag to her lover's neck. "Is there anything you can do to slow the bleeding?"

"Yes, of course," she said. She laid Less down gently, then went to see what she could do. She hesitated. "This man is... very sick," she said. She didn't move closer than six feet away. She raised a hand and there was a green glow from her palm. She shuffled back, her eyes staring.

But Rey could feel the flow of blood ebb. Either that meant he had no more to give, or that Imogen had done something. Leaning close she could see the slight rise and fall of his chest -- he was alive.

"He should be... what is that?" she said almost with wonder in her voice, but heavily laced with fear.

Rey could hear it, too, like a discordant note just below the music the priestesses were making, something that was coming from Richard. Something... wonderful and frightening. Something that called out to be touched.

Rey must have been staring for some time because suddenly Niveanne was there. She hadn't heard or seen the ice nymph's approach. She had the iron box in hand.

"Stand away, Autumn Queen. The Key must be taken from him," she said coldly.

Rey took Imogen's hand in a tight grip and backed away, pulling Imogen with her. "Be careful, Mira," Rey said, placing a subtle emphasis on her friend's name. She knew who stood before her, and she would be damned if she let the Ice Princess stay in control of her friend for even a millisecond longer than she needed to be.

Niveanne looked at Rey but said nothing. Then she knelt next to Richard and lifted his mail shirt, feeling inside. What she lifted out was a tethered, squirming worm that immediately attempted to slither from her grasp. She paid it no heed and with a jerk, snapped the tether. Once free of Richard, it ceased squirming and assumed its actual form; that of a large key, similar in some ways to a skeleton key, but covered in strange script.

With the Key now in hand, she walked back toward Less. She knelt down next to him and whispered in his ear. "I am sorry you were injured. I'm certain you would have wanted to be there when I return this to our Queen." She left him a cold kiss on his cheek, then began looking around the alley, searching for something.

"What are you waiting for? Put the Key in the box!" Rey took a step toward Less and the Ice Princess, and wondered what the heck was going on.

"The Key does not belong in this world. It must be returned," Niveanne said. "There. The door I need is in there." She was looking at the apartment complex itself.

"Niveanne!" The effort caused a shooting pain in Less' abdomen and he moaned. "The

Queen wants the Key separated from the Gates. You risk undoing her plans by returning it to Arcadia. Let us keep it imprisoned here in the mortal world." He gasped for breath between each sentence.

"Put the Key in the box," Rey said, putting some strength behind her words, and hoped the queen Less spoke of wasn't his Keeper - and the source of Niveanne. "We can't let the Key get away, or it will try to do this all over again."

Niveanne paused. "Through me, the Key will never get away again," she said without looking back. It seemed her crystalline body had fogged over.

"Less, *do* something!" Rey said and took a step forward.

Less forced himself to stand, leaning heavily on his umbrella and waving Imogen off. "Niveanne, wait! I will give you what you want, something of me. Just put the Key in the iron box."

Niveanne turned to face Less. The battle between a selfish desire to have something for herself warred with the impulse to serve the Ice Queen across her face, but it was a brief fight. Niveanne was too much the fae image of her maker to ignore selfish desires. She put the Black Key in the box and took a step toward Less, an eager, almost greedy wonder playing across her icy features.

In that moment, the Summer King shouted, "Take her down, now!" Ishtar called out, "Retrieve that box!"

The swarming host that had been held in reserve in fear of the power of the Key was unleashed. Changelings of every court that had come to be here to support the motley of Winter and Autumn swept past Less, nearly toppling him, but Imogen was there at his elbow to steady him.

Niveanne recognized the danger immediately, and threw out an arm. Ice formed in a twenty yard radius all around her covering pavement and cement in a slick that sent the first wave sliding out of control. As she crashed through the door of the apartment building, changeling careened into each other and the wall.

A Summer fire elemental evaporated the trap in an instant, though. Niveanne had bought herself only an instant. But was it all she needed?

Almost out of nowhere, Drake was there, sword in hand, and dashed through the door behind Niveanne. "Mira, my love," he said. "Come back to me!"

Less had been reaching for Niveanne when the Summer warriors surprised him. The anguish of being separated from her was evident on his face when he managed to meet her eyes as he was knocked aside. He knew the Door she was looking for. It led to a Trod the Bleak Seal sometimes used and was in the electrical closet on the third floor. With an

effort of will, he ignored the pain of his wounds and winked out of sight. With the speed of a zephyr, he raced down the alley. He didn't even slow down as he reached the fire escape. He just called up a wind that forced open his umbrella above him. He shot up into the air, struggled to steady himself at the third floor, then crashed like a gale through the window. He fought his way free to the corridor, then roared towards the Door, desperately hoping to catch the Ice Princess before she made the refuge of their Queen.

Meanwhile, Niveanne had run through the lower floor. She noticed Drake coming, and veered into an elevator, just managing to get the door closed before Drake reached her. Having no other recourse, Drake was forced to run up stairs, checking each floor to see if the elevator stopped.

It all came together at the third floor. As Less made it to the door he knew Niveanne would try for, she stepped out of the elevator. Drake charged from the stairwell, grabbing her and tackling her to the floor, but Niveanne's icy skin slipped his grip. She rolled to her feet and looked to be getting ready to barrel right through Less, taking him with her if she had to.

Less flickered into visibility between Niveanne and the Door. "Please don't go!"

Niveanne stopped. "Winter King, the Black Key must be taken to Arcadia. It is not of this world. Only the Ice Queen can do this. As long as this key remains in your world, neither your world or the realms of Arcadia are safe." She held her out to Less when Drake recovered his balance and acted.

"I'm sorry, but it is my duty to protect our Duchy and we kept it safe for thousands of years. What will the Ice Queen do with the Key except use it against us?"

Niveanne frowned, thinking his words treachery against the Ice Queen. She tried to get around him but Less being right in front of her door made it impossible. With Less distracting and inhibiting her, Drake took advantage of an opportunity and struck her hard with the flat of her sword.

Instead of stunning her, it shocked her. She turned toward him, her hand coming to the side of her head where the blow had landed. She gave him a look of hurt that went beyond the physical pain. It lasted but a moment because she quickly realized he wasn't going to stop, nor was she planning on standing there and taking a beating from him.

"You should not have done that." She said, hurt still in her voice. Niveanne batted Drake's sword aside with the iron box and then slammed and icy fist into his chest, shattering a rib.

Drake didn't give up. With Less preventing her escape, Niveanne was forced to battle an experienced swordsman with an enchanted blade with nothing but her bare fists, though Drake was careful to use the flat of his blade. He wanted her stunned and incapacitated, not mutilated or killed.

They exchanged blows, each delivering painful and crushing damage to the other. Niveanne, borrowing Mira's own powers, had made her body so crystalline hard every blow was like being hit with a steel hammer. Drake's every swing was as surgical as it was damaging. In the tight confines of the corridor, it looked for a moment like Niveanne had the advantage and she closed for hard body strikes, but Drake was not vulnerable to that move. He slammed his pommel into her forehead, her eyes lost focus and rolled up, and she dropped to the floor, insensate. The iron box slipped from her fingers at Less's feet as if in a final, wordless plea to take the Key to the Ice Queen.

Drake knelt next to the fallen Ice Princess, with pain - both physical and emotional - on his face. "How do we get rid of this?" he asked, gesturing at Mira, but obviously referring to the Ice Princess.

Less ripped the tape from the iron box's locking mechanism and slammed it shut with finality. When he was finished, he turned back to the icy body. He brushed past Drake to stroke the frozen face. *Niveanne*. "Mira, come back to me."

"Answer me," Drake said, his voice hard. "How do we get rid of the ice woman forever?"

Niveanne's form melted away, leaving the unconscious form of Mira instead. Blood welled from injuries to her forehead and temple, running thick and red into her hair.

Pounding feet and the ding of the elevator warned them only a moment before the door to the stairs and the door for the elevator opened. Changelings of Summer and Spring, as well as the Autumn Queen soon flooded the narrow hall.

"There's the traitor!" someone yelled.

Less stood and faced the crowd with his hands up in a placating gesture. "The danger has passed. The Black Key is contained." He gestured at the locked iron box.

"Mira is no traitor to the Duchy," Rey said firmly. She moved to stand between Mira and the other changelings in the hallway. "She made a great sacrifice to help us overcome the Black Key. We'll now take the Key and give it to the priestesses who are devoted to guarding it, and take Mira to a safe place to recover."

The crowd, confronted by two regents, cooled a little. The primary concern was the Black Key. Too many people had been hurt because of it already and no one was eager to be close to what was clearly an enormously powerful and dangerous artifact of Faerie.

Rey and Less made sure the box containing the Key was brought to the priestesses, who quickly removed the thing and left with more priestesses that had arrived by car. Drake was seen to by Annie Millet, one of the surgeons of the summer court while Ruben Scammel, another surgeon of summer, checked on Mira. After being judged in poor condition, but unlikely to deteriorate further, they got Drake's broken ribs wrapped tight and wrapped some gauze around Mira's head to help stop any further bleeding. She was

concussed, said Ruben, and needed to be watched.

Ishtar and Storm began dispersing the assembled changelings and organized getting the injured off the street. In mere minutes, the area of the alley and apartment was left with no sign anything had happened there. Richard, Drake, Mira and Less, as the wounded, were removed to the abandoned Muldrow house they'd used earlier. Clearly, the Black Key's influence was over and it was time to assess the damage. Rey remained with them along with a few officers of Autumn and Winter who remained discretely out of sight but watching over the house. Ishtar, as the reigning regent, would investigate and monitor the Breaches to see what impact capturing the Key might have made.

This left Imogen, Rey, Mira (who was out of it but conscious), Less, Drake, and Richard (who was awake but quiet). Richard had been moved by a pair of Summer Ogres and was in rough shape. But he showed no signs of violence. Besides, the Ghul and some Winter agents were within a single shout's distance away and could come help if there was trouble.

Rey moved to his bedside and looked down at him, but kept herself from reaching out to touch him. "Richard," she said softly, watching his face.

"Rey," he said. "I'm sorry."

"For what," she replied. "There was no defense against the Key."

He looked at his hand. Black veins still pulsed. He pulled some of the blanket down and saw his bare chest, warped with muscle and a spidery network of blackened veins. He didn't say anything, but he knew what it meant. He closed his eyes. "I think... I have gone mad."

A lump formed in her throat. "The priestesses said once someone is taken by the Key..." She had to force herself to continue. "Is there anything I can do for you?"

He rolled his head from side to side a little. "No," he whispered. "My anger... burns." He closed his eyes.

"I was told that my decisions, my choices, would decide whether you lived or died." She felt a tear run down her cheek. "I wanted you to be free of the Key at the end. Did I make a mistake?"

He seemed not to hear. By the rhythmic rise and fall of his chest, he was asleep.

"Sleep well, my love," Rey whispered, and gently kissed his cheek. "May nightmares never find you." She walked out of the bathroom, her head held high as a Queen in crisis should. Her eyes fell upon Sissy, and she moved to stand in front of her.

"Viscissitude," Rey said softly, almost formally.

The pale, stealthy darkling seemed to material from shadows. "Yes, majesty?" she said very quietly, careful not to disturb those recovering.

"It may seem an obvious decision, but I wanted to tell you personally that if you wish to continue as Ghul, you will. I have no desire to remove the person who fills that role so ably."

Sissy paused in thought, then said, "Thank you, majesty. I would like to." In so doing, she helped prove she could separate her personal life from her professional duty.

"Richard is asleep," Rey says, proud at her being able to keep her voice level, though she knew her eyes revealed the sorrow she was feeling. "But he knows what has happened to him and believes he has fallen into madness. Should he wake and his anger consumes him, and there is no other choice, please do what you can to make sure it is as swift and painless as possible. If his condition changes, regardless of how, let me know." She gave Sissy one of her business cards from the casino, with her personal cell phone number written on the back.

Sissy looked down at the card and then back at Rey. "I'm sorry, majesty." She shook her head. "I'll try to help him, especially if he looks like he might hurt himself. But he is my motley mate. I am sworn to help him, not hurt him."

"I understand," Rey said, not wanting to say how much it hurt her to have been the one to strike the last blow to take him down and get him out from under the Key's power. "I would not ask you to betray any oaths. Do what you can for him. I just don't want him to suffer." Her voice broke a bit at the end, and she took a moment to get a composure back. "But please, call me with updates, if you can. If I don't answer, leave a message."

Sissy nodded and added less formally, "I will."

Meanwhile, in the living room, Mira reposed on the dilapidated couch. Less and Drake were both there watching her. Imogen was in residence, too; she healed all of Drake's wounds, leaving only some fading bruises. But she said her power was stretched dangerously thin. She needed for Mira to recover from the lesser effects of the fighting before she could attend whatever more serious damage Mira might have. She was much more cautious in her evaluation of Mira's injuries than the surgeon had been. She was certain that Mira had at least small fractures in her skull and should not move until she had some time to recover.

"We also need to deal with Niveanne. She cannot be allowed to remain within Mira," Rey said quietly, hoping that Less would agree with her, and counted in Drake's support in this.

Imogen had meant to be silent, but she'd seen some strange things today and was having trouble understanding some of them. She couldn't see changelings' fae miens, but she did witness Mira transforming from an ordinary, if lovely, young woman into a being

seemingly made of pure ice. Less had addressed her differently then, and she'd acted very differently, to the point of trying to steal the Black Key for reasons she couldn't understand. It made no sense to her that the one person the Key couldn't directly affect would want something so clearly dangerous and destructive.

"Is Mira emotionally unwell? Like schizophrenic or suffer from multiple personalities?" Imgoen asked. She worried the head injuries might make her condition worse.

Rey shook her head. "The best way to describe it is that she has part of another being inside her, who manifests as that being of ice. An icicle, plunged into her heart, holds the other being. Mira wants it out, and we need to figure out a way to do that which won't kill her."

Imogen's eyebrows rose in concern. "Removing something lodged in a person's heart? Using mundane ways, outside of a hospital, seems like a sure way to kill her."

"We'll lose her if we don't get it out," Rey replied. "A purely mundane method is out, though we ought to consult with Dr. Tom. He may have some ideas."

Less was resting and watching Mira sleep. He was clearly troubled by the recent events. He felt for Rey and Richard, of course, but he was dwelling on Niveanne's betrayal. She had been content to leave him forever. What would the Ice Queen have done if she had received the Black Key? What would have happened to Niveanne? He supposed she would have been subsumed back into the Keeper, leaving Mira free of the icicle that pierced her heart but enslaved in the Hedge once again. He was only a little surprised that he felt a twinge of jealousy at the thought.

All moot, as Niveanne remained. They all wanted her gone from Mira's body, but only Less did not want her destroyed. She was the only contact he had with the Ice Queen, the Lady who held his heart. Was it possible to turn Niveanne's allegiance? In the alley, Less had been ready to give her something of him. He had been prepared to give her his conscience, such that it was. Would that have stopped her from stealing the Key?

Rey had a point and Doctor Tom was not far. He arrived shortly after Rey called him, as he was lurking about the neighborhood having missed all the excitement by only minutes.

After the situation was explained to him, he stated firmly that he felt this was possible to do. He asserted that should this be attempted on the operating table of a hospital, the result would be lethal and quick. However, he believed his own healing powers of Spring, combined with Imogen's innate talents, could potentially prevent loss of life. It was a feat he'd never attempted before, but was interested in trying.

That catch was that this was going to hurt. A lot. He needed to saw through her sternum and pull apart her rib cage to get past her lungs and to her heart. Careful use of healing will prevent the massive bleeding that would normally ensue, but it did little to alleviate the pain of cutting. The shock of that pain alone could possibly kill her. Therefore, it was

critical that the motley somehow either acquire powerful medicine to put her under, something he didn't recommend due to her head injuries for fear there was a very high probability she would never wake, or find some magic that would work.

"Then we need to get working on find it," Rey said. "Mira doesn't want to keep living like this. She wants the icicle gone. And we need to get rid of it." She switched to Glymjack Cant and continued. "Niveanne is an aspect of a Keeper, and can't remain here. That icicle needs to be destroyed or locked away somewhere so far, so deep that it will never, ever, see the light of day again."

Less' own heart was absent from his body, but he was pretty sure they weren't looking for a method that involved a Keeper. He would try visiting Niveanne in Mira's dreams again. The dark vampire dreams seemed to torture Niveanne (perhaps even more than they tortured Mira), and it was possible he could barter with it for some clue as to how to remove the icicle without killing Mira.

Drake held Mira's hand, and his eyes never left her face. "I agree with you, Queen Lafitte," Drake said softly. "That thing needs to be gone. And I believe I know if a way it might be removed without needing to cut Mira open, though we may need to have healers at her side to heal her immediately."

Doctor Tom was fascinated. "How might you suggest it be done?"

"I've heard stories of a hedgeplant called witches' root," Drake said. "It can be used to remove anything from a body, but it causes damage. Nowhere near as deadly as open heart surgery, but it could still kill if there's no healer nearby. The root, when placed over the affected body part, will burrow down into the body, find what you want to get rid of, and then draw it out. We'll need something for the root to use. The ice woman's name should work. But we still need to find the root."

That perked up Less' ears. The possibility of safely removing the Ice Queen's icicle was good news, but for some time he had been wanting to go on a botanical expedition into the Hedge. He wanted to try to confirm the existence of a goblin fruit known as Bloodroot which would help him get an upper hand in his dealings with the Barony of Shadows. Of course, he should also be worrying about what would happen to the icicle once they removed it from Mira. Its destruction would be the end of Niveanne.

"I think we'll have to check the goblin markets and hope we find it there," Rey said. "I don't think we have the time to search the Hedge for it."

"And we should talk to Peaches," added Less. "She might know something about it."

Rey nodded. "The faster we can get the root, the better." She looked at Less. "Less, could you go right now and ask Ishtar if she has the root? We need to get all this done before Mira wakes up - and Niveanne has the power to interfere. If the Ice Princess tries to interfere, then Mira could die. Or worse."

Doctor Tom seemed started, then he nodded emphatically. "Excellent, Queen Laffitte, excellent. Queen Ishtar is known for what is said to be an extensive garden and hedge fruit collection. Perhaps she is still outside somewhere..."

"Run out and check, will you Tom?" asked Less politely. "I'll call her hotline." He pulled out his cell and dialled the number from memory.

Between the two of them, they were able to get Ishtar's attention. She arrived in the house in a few minutes. She greeted everyone with a look and a nod.

"Doctor Tom says you require an herb for your nymph," Ishtar said.

Rey looked at Less, and waited for him to tell Ishtar what they needed.

Less stood and stepped into Ishtar's personal space. His skin prickled at being so near the goddess. He spoke quietly, "The only reason we could safely handle the *Eochair Dubh* to put it into its iron prison was because Mira has an Arcadian being living inside her. Her heart is pierced with an icicle from the Hedge. We need Witches' Root to bury in and extract the shard of ice, and thus free Mira of her alternate persona."

"An interesting choice," Ishtar said quietly. "It could work. Your motley also has a bit of a problem. Some... troublemakers may view what Mira did quite different. Reports are already beginning to trickle in about the Breaches not closing. They may begin to throw suspicion upon your entire motley. Of course *I* do not believe it for a second. I'm just one regent of a small court but I could convince the Summer King of the truth and make all that go away before it even begins. In fact, I could get that root to you very soon and resolve your problem at once, if I might ask a favor of both you and Queen Lafitte."

Less nodded and beckoned Rey over.

Ishtar's voice grows cold with the strength of old oak. "I want you and Rey to cease meddling with my witches. Effectively immediately. I don't want to so much as smell that you've sent another spy or that she has said one more word that subverts my followers' faith. Do you follow, Winter King?"

Rey looked at Less and blinked. He'd done what? How could he have been so foolish? She herself had been so careful not to say anything that would disrupt what Ishtar had been telling the witches. Had she made some mistake?

It was an easy request to grant. He had already wrapped up that line of investigation and had no intention of continuing. He wasn't aware that any of his agents had cast aspersions on the witches' faith but it was unimportant now. He simply nodded and said, "Granted."

Ishtar looked to see if Rey also agreed.

"I apologize, Queen Ishtar," Rey said, her confusion and puzzlement evident on her face. "I though I'd been very careful, not telling them anything that would dispute your teachings or their faith. Are you telling me I am not allowed to associate with my sister?"

"I'm saying that some of your discussions were taken to mean that I was a changeling like you. This is false. Whether you -- or any other changeling for that matter -- choose to believe it or not, I am in fact the living incarnation of Ishtar," said Ishtar. "If it was not you that said these things, then I apologize, but it would be all the easier to agree to my demand. And then I will solve your problems for you."

This was said loud enough even Doctor Tom heard it. He was standing away so she couldn't see his expression but it was obvious by his large eyes and twirling finger pointed at his head that he thought she was loony.

"Very well," Rey said, wondering what problems they had beyond needing the root to save Mira. "I agree not to meddle with your witches."

Mira moaned, stirred and finally sat up. She regretted it immediately, clutched her head and sank back down.

"Looks like I better get that root to you quickly." The reigning queen made her exit, calling someone on her phone as she did.

"We've found a way to get the icicle removed," Drake said softly, gently brushing the hair off Mira's face and tucking a tendril behind her ear. In fact, we'll be able to do it very soon."

Mira held her head gingerly and closed her eyes. She was quiet so long Drake began to wonder if she heard him. Then she said, "May I have a glass of water?"

Drake brushed a feather-light kiss across her forehead. "I'll be right back." He went to the kitchen to see what he could find. There was an unopened bottle of water in the fridge, which Drake grabbed, and opened it up as he returned to her side.

"Here," he said. "Let me help you sit up a bit." He lifted her shoulders up off the floor and supported her head, then carefully shimmied himself around so that she ended up between his legs, leaning back against him for support.

Mira cuddled in his arms and said, "Thank you." She stayed still for another minute, gathering strength. Then she stirred her finger round and round. The water in the bottle swirled in response, freezing and extending from the bottle on a brittle finger of ice. It shaped itself like a vine with icy tendrils wrapping and re-wrapping endlessly. Drake could feel Mira slump more and more weakly as she did it.

But she wouldn't stop. Finally, the ice melded together in a single, static form. It was a

copy, in miniature, of Drake's own sword. She caught it as it and the bottle from which it grew toppled, and then handed him the sculpture with shaking hands. Exhausted and now bereft of all her magic, she closed her eyes and leaned back against Drake.

"The ice princess in my heart would never allow you to take her away while I still live. But she has only the power I possess, and now I have none," she murmured. "Do what you must. We have no strength left to resist."

(Tag if Drake or anyone else wanted to talk with Mira before someone arrives with the root.)

(a character recovers 1 bash per 15 minutes so I let Mira have 1 point back. That makes her cognizant but with all her other health boxes full, in almost crippling pain. So, she isn't inclined to go anywhere very quickly.)

It was only ten minutes later when Peaches arrives with a picnic basket that contained not just the root, but the entire plant. After handing it off to Doctor Tom, she recommended that if used, it needed to be done in the Hedge -- or a Breach. The witchroot wouldn't grow or do its job if it didn't have the correct magical environment as provided by the Hedge.

Drake gathered Mira up into his arms with infinite care and looked to Less and Rey. "I will carry her wherever we need to go," he said, holding Mira close against his heart.

"It's probably safest if we go to our Hollow," said Less.

"You want to take Drake into our Hollow?" Rey asked in Glymjack Cant, just wanting to be sure.

"Unless you want to carry Mira the whole way, yes," returned Less in sign. "He's proven himself to be dedicated to our cause more than once."

"Regardless," Rey replied in sign. "We need to use an entrance other than my house. I don't want him knowing there's a Door there, especially not when I might have to go through the effort of moving it."

"If we can't use your door, that leaves either the pond or using Less's tunnels to find a new way, both of which will then take too long. I suggest we find a Breach then," said Doctor Tom.

Rey realized Doctor Tom was right. "No, a Breach has the potential for too much trouble." She returned to speaking English. "We'll use my Door," she said, and looked at Drake. "I trust you will keep all of this to yourself?"

Drake nodded. "Yes, Queen Lafitte."

"Very well," Rey said. "When we get there... Just watch out for the mice."

They made the trip quickly and uneventfully. Rey's house was a mess and it smelled like the kitty litter hadn't been changed in weeks. Sprung mouse traps littered the floor as well as cereal from boxes that had toppled from cabinets. Holes burrowed into the cardboard told a dramatic story of theft, overindulgence, and murder. Toppled lamps, crooked pictures and new holes in the baseboards declared the house a war zone of Tom and Jerry proportions. But thankfully, peace had settled over the house for now.

Drake noticed that on the way over, Mira's eyes had sharpened, though he could tell her head was hurting her something fierce. She still clung to him with her arms around his neck and although she was awake enough to walk, never asked to be set down. She had been silent the entire way as she steeled herself for what might be a terrible ordeal that could end with her life being taken away. She didn't want to spoil what could be her last moments with pointless talk.

The door flickered open for the motley members and Drake ducked through with Mira. They soon found themselves in their own hollow. The skies were brightly lit with stars in unfamiliar constellations. Strange calls echoed from beyond in the Hedge. The little sprite that maintained their home here for them fluttered about worriedly.

Mira asked they do it down next to her spring. It was the one place in the Hedge she felt most strongly connected to and she wanted to be there when they used the witchroot on her.

Drake gave her a gentle, love-filled kiss and sat down with her, resting her head in his lap. "This may hurt," he said, and placed his hand over the bottom half of her mouth. "If you need to, bite down on my hand. Don't worry about hurting me. I heal quickly."

Doctor Tom opened the basket and carefully lifted the witchroot out with one hand, making sure not to touch the roots, while removing a small note with the other. "We're supposed to set the witchroot on the body part that has the item we wish to remove, then tell it what it is to retrieve." He placed the root on Mira's chest, then look at Rey.

"Remove Niveanne and the icicle that holds her," Rey said, and immediately the plant's leaves twitched, and the roots slipped down into Mira's body.

The plant started to visibly grow. New shoots sprouted, reached skyward, and thickened. Mira's body stiffened in pain, she gasped for breath, but it wasn't until the Witchroot started emitting a high-pitched wail that she bit down hard on Drake's hand. The plant's keening came in a staccato of short shrieks, like a cartoon witch cackling over a cauldron. It was nearly unbearable. Auriel flitted off with a cry and the Motley covered their ears to dampen the pain. As the cackles died, several bruise-coloured fruit oozed from clumps of leaves heavy with sap.

Less was frozen with concern for both Mira and Niveanne. His lack of control left his eyes and mouths to become a chaotic mass of random animation. "Is it over, Tom?"

Tom shook his head grimly. "Now we must remove the plant. This is the worst part. Less, please take a firm grip of the plant near the root. You must put firm but even pressure on the plant. Yank on it and the stem will break leaving the roots in her chest along with the shard. I will do my best to heal the damage to her body as you pull it free.

Mira eyes widened as she began to panic. She didn't think she could take much more. Her muffled screams began as Less did as Tom instructed. Drake had to hold her while Less pulled harder and harder. He felt the nasty weed would snap at any moment. Mira's muffled screams rose in pitch as bones began to snap with wet finality. Tom worked his magic as well as he could, but he was clearly very quickly running out of power. Rey had to grab Mira's thrashing legs so she wouldn't jerk and cause the witchroot plant to break in Less's hands. Ollie, Mira's otter, came out of the waters of the spring and attacked Less's leg, savagely sinking his teeth into his calf and clawing shredding his pant legs with diminutive growls.

The plant came free with a bloody plop. Mira's screams cut off as she lost consciousness. Her chest was a bloody ruin as Doctor wrung his hands and called for the sprite to bring goblin fruit -- anything she could find that was edible -- immediately.

"Less, quick!" Rey said, now holding Mira's legs with one hand. "The berries over by the pool."

Drake looked at Doctor Tom and asked "Is there anything we can do to stop the bleeding, to help her before she gets the fruit? I've got some experience. Maybe it could help you do more."

Tom nodded. "I've used enough magic to seal off the hole in her heart for now, but her lungs and ribs have been damaged. She must heal this on her own and she can't do that while she's unconscious. She has the unique ability to heal by eating faerie foods but she must be awake to do that. You must rouse her somehow. I'll begin binding her wound and we must collect now what we can for her to eat."

The otter decided to leave off ravaging the one leg, only to then determinedly attack Less's other leg. It hurt a lot. The little devil seemed to think that it was defending Mira somehow and it just wouldn't quit. A mouth on Less' leg, revealed by his shredded trousers, growled and snapped at Oliver even as Less flinched his leg away. Oliver had scratched dangerously close to his eye. His hands were full of Witch's Root and he was worried what it would do if it's roots came in contact with the otter or with anything else, for that matter. "I'm -- Ow! I'm trying!" he shouted to Rey. "Can you call Ollie or something? Ow!"

"He only ever listens to Mira," Rey said, then held her hand out. "Give me the root, then you can get away from Ollie."

Less threw the bush at Rey and took off to the pool. He hoped he could outrun the little animal but those short legs were surprisingly fast. Ollie's teeth were like needles as Less tore off berries and dropped them into his hat.

Rey caught the witchroot and began to examine the plant's roots, looking for the icicle and intending to quickly extract it.

The plant was close enough to Drake that he could reach out and touch it - and he did. He snatched one of the fruit from the plant and tore the flesh of it open small pieces. He put one of the pieces over Mira's mouth and squeezed, letting the juice dribble into her mouth, and hoped it could start her healing.

Black, viscous fluid dripped from his fist. Whatever it touched was stained black. The sticky stuff smelled sweet but had a coppery note, as well. He wasn't sure it was doing anything, but he kept it up while Less collected what he could.

A few minutes later, Drake had squeezed the last of the fruit and was reasonably sure at least some of the stuff got into Mira's mouth. Less was returning with a hatful of berries when Auriel joined him toting a pair of tomato-like things of a purple color. Mira began choking and spitting black fluid, then moaned in pain as a cough brought what felt like knives of fire shooting through her chest.

Doctor Tom had finished binding her chest to try to keep her shattered sternum and broken ribs from moving too much.

Mira wanted more than anything to scream until her voice was raw, but taking such a breath hurt so badly she thought she might pass out again. Even moving her arms was excruciating. She couldn't stop crying from the pain. She'd never wanted to die so badly in her entire life. To die and let the pain go away. But the sticky juice Drake had made her take was like adrenalin. She couldn't let darkness take her any more than she could make the pain go away.

She ate what Drake and Less fed her, even if Drake had to work her jaw and force her to swallow.

It took a long time, an hour before she began to show signs of improvement. It was another hour before the pain receded enough Mira could think or speak.

Doctor Tom declared she would recover and could be allowed to rest. He prescribed one fruit every two hours for the next day and then promised after that she would be right as rain -- better than she ever had been now the shard was gone from her heart.

During this time, Rey found what she was looking for, and tucked it into one of her pockets and zipped it shut, to keep it safe. She would find a place to store it until she could find a way to either destroy it, or put it somewhere it could never be used again.

Less was operating on automatic. He tended diligently to Mira and helped clean up the Hollow, but he barely spoke. Clearly, the Ice Queen's icicle had been removed and the Ice Princess - Niveanne - was gone. *He had been so close to getting some answers!* He figured Rey must have the shard. He chided himself for losing control during the Witchroot operation and losing sight of it, but the situation had been so overwhelming. *But what could he have done?* No one would have let him walk off with it as a keepsake, and stabbing it into someone's heart would have been out of the question. His own, perhaps, but certainly not with everyone watching and a witchroot plant at hand. He would bide his time and return to his never-ending search for his Keeper. In a dream, maybe. Certainly he was tired enough to spend the rest of the Season asleep.

With the Black Key secured the world, or at least Mythic City, was safe from being engulfed by Faerie and turned into the playground of a mysterious and powerful Gentry mastermind. The Breaches remained, but so far those faerie creatures that inhabited them could not venture far. They would have to be carefully managed.

Niveanne was gone for now, but there was still an imposter Richard roaming the city. Why and what he wanted was still a mystery. Finally, the threat of the third and eldest dragon still loomed over their heads like the sword of Damocles.