

January 20th, 2012

Mizuko was nervous as hell. The Ashen Queen had called her apartment — her new apartment and at the number that Mizuko herself had only known for a week — earlier that day and had given her terse instructions to meet her at a little magic shop called "Incidental Enchantments" tonight after dark.

After dark. Mizuko knew that the Ashen Queen's power was greatest at night and weakest during the day. It was the nature of darkling power after all. She thought she shouldn't be nervous about that, and that the queen always preferred meetings in the evening wherever possible. Mizuko had met like this with the queen many times on business, but this time the queen had ordered her to come whereas normally she phrased it as a request.

She wished she still had the dress Rey had made her, but it was still being repaired. She had to make do with her usual clothing. Today that meant a stretchy turtleneck sweater and jeans that Amber told her looked good on her but that felt tight. She had covered up against the winter weather with her ugly, puffy coat, called in to Corazon's to apologize for missing work tonight and then took the bus to that cute little shopping area west of downtown Mythic.

Incidental Enchantments was already closed, but someone opened the door after she knocked. The Paladin of Shadows was there, known more socially to her as Rey's boyfriend, Richard, but he didn't seem at all comforting. She felt his eyes on her as she made her way to the back room of the small shop. Part of her felt foolish for being nervous. She had no reason to be except for this anxiety over a tiny little thing.

Veridia was waiting for her in the little office in the back room of the shop. Mizuko removed her coat, hung it on the nearby antique coat rack, then curtsied before her queen as Veridia had taught her.

"I have some rather disturbing information about you, my Legate." Veridia's voice was calm, almost pleasant, and completely at odds with her words.

Mizuko felt her blood run cold in her veins. *"I'm not sure I understand what you mean, my Queen."*

"You enjoy the company of a group of vampires, correct?"

Mizuko's eyes widened and she blushed. She stammered, *"I-I don't, I mean yes. I have."* She looked for help in Richard's face but found no sympathy there. The Paladin scowled back at her and she quickly looked away, realizing she very much did not like it when Richard scowled at her. His brows came together at his center of his bull-like head and made him look very angry. She remembered seeing him nearly cut an ogre in half with one swing of a makeshift battle axe and noted uncomfortably that he had a real battle axe with him now. The Glacial Axe, in fact.

"Explain."

*"Well, if by company you mean did I enjoy meeting a few of them, then yes I did."* Mizuko felt heat rise in her face, so she hurried to continue. *"Most of them were very polite to me. There was only one that I recall that was not pleasant."*

"I see." Veridia's gaze bore into Mizuko. "Are you having sex with them?"

*"Not at the moment,"* Mizuko replied with a quick smile. The smile evaporated as Veridia's stare continued to skewer her. *"I-I mean I am not having sex with a bunch of vampires. I have had sex as recently as a month ago with one of them, and only one of them ever."*

"Why would someone think you were having sex with all of them," Veridia asked.

Mizuko had to think about that, then offered, *"I, ah, went to a club. Not a dance club."* Her face had turned a crimson color and her eyes stayed focused on Veridia's feet. It wasn't that she was ashamed. It was that she was just very embarrassed to be talking about this with her queen. *"It-it was a club where people have sex. At least one other of Remy's friends was there. But I didn't have sex with him. Just with-with Remy. May I ask, please, why you want to know all this?"*

"I am concerned my Legate might not be mine, but a vampire's," Veridia answered bluntly.

*"No, my Queen. My loyalty is to this court and freehold."*

"If I were to order you to find out his hiding place in order that he might be destroyed, would you do it?"

*"I consider him my friend,"* Mizuko replied slowly. *"I have shared with him something I have not shared with any other being since junior prom. I would not lightly turn on my friends, but if so ordered by my Queen, I would have no choice but to obey."*

"Why is he a friend," Veridia asked. "What has he done to earn that title from you?"

*"Well he... um."* Mizuko puzzled over that, then concluded, *"He treats me well and with respect. Aside from him, only my motley mates do that. I like it."*

"Is that all he has done? No other service or assistance?" Veridia's gaze was unrelenting.

*"He has done more,"* Mizuko admitted. *"A vampire that was not so pleasant as he took interest in the casino our Witch of the Bitter Wind works at and I learned he intended to take it over. If not buy it, then by taking over and controlling the manager — Rey. I was able to get the location of this menace from him, from Remy and I let Rey's friends know. Apparently werewolves enjoy destroying vampires and they had the problem solved in a night. Then in December Rey was accosted by a supernatural predator that devoured life energy through the use of fear and nightmare. I was able to discover her location but the effort incapacitated me. One of Remy's people, took part in her rescue in my stead, along side the Winter King and another motley mate, Rover, while Remy took care of me and made sure I didn't hurt myself or others."*

"Does Witch Lafitte know of Remy? Who and what he is?"

*"Yes. She knew he was a vampire well before I realized it."*

Veridia looked at Richard who seemed first surprised, then angered. He looked like he wanted to say something. She nodded at him.

"I've met this vampire. I was told he was ensorcelled. I was not informed he was a vampire or the evening would not have been so pleasant as it was."

Mizuko stared at him. To her recollection, they'd both been nearly blown to hell. She got the picture, though; he really hated vampires. Mizuko felt like walls were closing in on her and she didn't understand why Richard was so angry and Veridia so suspicious. *"I was telling the truth. He is ensorcelled — partially. I didn't want to expose our people to a vampire. So I only exposed himself. His ensorcellment is only partial and has consequences should he discuss my or any changeling secrets with non-changelings. Why does it matter that he is a vampire?"*

"It is the fact he is a supernatural being, and not a mortal," Veridia replied sternly. "It is very difficult for a mortal to influence or control us. It is far easier for a supernatural, and sometimes without the victim even knowing they are being controlled. My Legate has the authority to speak for me. If you are being unduly influenced, neither your judgement nor your words can be trusted. You would be a danger both to me and to Autumn." She leaned back in her chair, apparently relaxed.

Mizuko looked thoughtful. *"Then I need to prove that I am under no one's influence. How may I do so, your highness?"*

"Tell Remy I want to meet with him and his friends on Wednesday night. You will be there." Veridia's tone left no room for argument.

"Yes, my queen," Mizuko responded.

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Mizuko was back in her new apartment later that night. She was alone, having sent Amber on an errand, so that she could think. Veridia wanted to meet Remy and she had to prove that she wasn't under his influence. Mizuko was certain she wasn't but didn't know how to prove that. She only knew that somehow the Queen would use the meeting to find evidence one way or the other.

If Veridia decided against her, what would it mean? She'd lose her position as Legate for one, Mizuko knew. Without the Queen's trust, who else would trust her? Would Rey? And thinking of Rey, how much trouble was she in with Richard for not telling him that Remy was a vampire? Richard seemed awfully upset and he had to have heard when she'd told Veridia that Rey had always known Remy was a vampire.

Mizuko shook her head as she paced back and forth in front of the TV in the spacious living room. There wasn't anything she could do about it if Richard was upset with Rey, but she suspected that if she lost the Queen's trust, she'd lose the trust of her motley as well. After all, wasn't she specifically sent to Less as a gesture of good will and trust? If the Queen couldn't trust her as the Legate, how then could she continue to trust her as Autumn's aide to Winter — now the Winter King? She could not.

A cold knot had formed in her chest. It was hard to breathe.

Mizuko looked down at the cell phone Remy had left with her a month ago. She'd managed not to lose or drown it, a new record for her. She stopped moving and squeezed her eyes shut, trying to push away her frayed nerves long enough to make the call. She needed to sound confident and authoritative, not scared she was about to lose everything in the world she thought important. It took her some time and effort but she got her hands to stop shaking and she thought she had her voice under control. Then she made the call.

"Good evening." Remy's voice caressed her ears after the third ring. Mizuko could hear voices speaking softly in the background but she couldn't make out what they were saying.

"Hello Remy." Mizuko was proud of the fact her voice wasn't shaking. She shifted into a formal mode but was unable to keep the tension and nervousness from her voice. "I have news. The Ashen Queen, my queen, has discovered our association and wishes to meet with you and ... and all your friends Wednesday night. By that she means yourself, Carson, Wilson, Annabeth and Minerva."

"Are you in trouble because of our relationship?"

"That has not been determined," Mizuko said. "Will you agree to a meeting?"

"Yes. What time, and where?"

"Seven at the auditorium of the closed high school, west Mythic campus." The school had been closed for some time. The city had hoped to afford to open the school again to relieve the pressure of too large classes and too few teachers but money hadn't been available. Funds seemed always to be diverted to other city "improvements" such as new parking ramps for the downtown business area and parks. So, while the

buildings still stood and the land still belonged to the city, they'd lain unused for almost ten years.

"I will be there," Remy replied. "Annabeth and Wilson will not be able to attend, but I will talk to Minerva and Carson."

"The Queen will be saddened that not all your friends can attend," Mizuko replied, her voice wilting slightly. "But she will be pleased you have chosen to meet." Mizuko paused, then added, "I will be there as well, Remy."

"Don't worry, ma petite," he said in a soothing, supportive voice. "We will do nothing that will sabotage or undermine you. Who else might be there?"

"The Queen and her guard, whom you already know," Mizuko answered. She swallowed, remembering the anger she saw in Richard's eyes. "Should Annabeth and Wilson become available, they would be welcome to this, the first meeting of its kind ever in the history of my Court and your people in this city."

"I will tell them and encourage their attendance," Remy replied, "but they are not in the city, and might not be able to return in time."

"Then we can expect no more. I look forward to seeing you Wednesday." Mizuko cut the connection.

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Somewhere in Santa Fe, Remy returned his cell phone to his pocket and looked at Carson and Minerva. They were chatting quietly in the corner, and he didn't want to interrupt them just yet. It was more than just Mizuko's words that caused him concern. She'd been very formal and abrupt during their conversation, and very unlike how she'd ever acted in his presence. The strain she was under was also evident in her voice, no matter how much she'd tried to hide it. Wednesday night. Not much time to prepare. He stood and crossed the room to join his friends and share the interesting news.

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Sunday morning Rey received a call from Veridia herself requesting a meeting. The location was a small magic shop near the strip mall not far from Rey's home and the time five pm.

Rey was, to say the least, surprised, both at the call and the request. She was also curious as to why Veridia wanted to talk to her.

A few minutes before five, Rey knocked on the door to the closed shop. The listed hours indicated it wasn't open Sundays. She'd seen the shop when she first explored her new neighborhood but never been into it, having wanted to avoid the painful reminders of what she'd lost when she was Taken. A moment later, the Autumn Queen opened the door and let Rey inside.

"Come with me," was all she said. Then the queen turned and led the way through the shop. Shelves were stocked full of books, candles, incense, jewelry, crystals, small statuettes, and the all the paraphernalia of the practicing occultist or new age experimentalist. The little brick building was long and narrow so that Rey had to carefully make her way down a narrow aisle to get to the back of the shop. Veridia took her inside the office, sat her down in a curved wood chair with arms, then leaned against the small desk that contained stacks of ledgers and paperwork. She folded her arms.

"Mizuko has been seeing a vampire," Veridia stated. "How long have you known?"

"Since the night they met," Rey replied. "I told her he was a vampire, but she didn't believe me. I told him I

knew what he was, too."

"How long ago was that?"

"September 23." Rey remembered that night well. She met both Chase and Alexei that night, though developed two completely different relationships with both men. "I've been keeping an eye on her behavior since then, watching for signs that he's turned her into a blood slave. I haven't seen any, and he knows that if he did that, I'd do everything in my power to destroy him because I told him I would."

"So it has been some time," Veridia mused. She turned her eyes away from Rey as she stared off in thought. It felt as if a pressure that Rey hadn't realized was there had been relieved. "Who initiated the contact? Or rather, who is pursuing whom?"

"Remy Deprez, the vampire, did. We were at a club and he bought her a drink. I don't know if either is pursuing the other right now, though. It appears they may have settled into a friends with benefits kind of relationship." Rey hesitated for a moment, then continued. "He does appear to care for her, at least as much as a vampire can."

Veridia's cold eyes flicked back to Rey's face. "What does that mean, precisely?"

Rey shrugged. "Vampires are supernatural predators, and the ones I've met have been self-centered, power hungry, arrogant, and care little about anything but their own wants and needs. Remy has displayed concern for Mizuko's well-being and those she cares about. The night I was kidnapped, he offered his assistance and possibly used his influence to get one of his friends to help when Mizuko was incapacitated by her efforts to locate me. In early January, he helped Mizuko, Richard and I when we went after those privateers and rescued the man they'd kidnapped. When the three of us returned, Mizuko was barely mobile and Richard was unconscious and badly wounded. He carried Richard and helped us get out of the faire grounds unseen, then drove us to my home so I could finish treating Richard's injuries.

"Mizuko would maintain that he's a 'good' vampire, and his actions do support that, but Mizuko can be... naive when it comes to motives. I find it hard to believe a vampire can stray so far from the norm, but I do not know what his plans are. The fact he is her lover is without question, though I don't believe they see each other often. If there is anything else, I simply don't know."

"Thank you Rey. That is very enlightening." Veridia inclined her head toward Ray. "What are your feelings about Deprez? Would you trust him?"

"I don't trust vampires in general," Rey said immediately. "But Deprez..." She tilted her head slightly and gave a little shrug. "It would depend on the subject at hand. So long as he is bound by pledge to Mizuko, he will not reveal anything he learns about our kind or face the Wyrds' retribution. With or without the pledge, I would trust him to protect Mizuko and keep her safe. I would not put it past him to lie through his teeth to get what he wants. That said, I believe that if he gives his word, he will keep it. He does have a code of honor and he abides by it, and he has proven himself to be a powerful ally, so long as our goals lie with his."

Veridia stared back at Rey for an uncomfortably long while as her mind calculated probabilities. Finally she showed a small, wolfish smile. "I appreciate your honesty. You've been most helpful in terms of supporting the Legate, but I would ask you not to mention our talk to her before the week is out."

Rey inclined her head slightly. "As you wish," she agreed.

The meeting over, Veridia let Rey out and locked up the store.

*January 25th, 2012*

The darkened building looked hollow and abandoned without teenagers making daily pilgrimages to its halls.

"This could be a trap," Carson repeated, standing in the shadows at the edge of the parking lot.

"So you've said," Remy replied. "So we will be prepared for that eventuality."

Minerva spoke for the first since they met just after sunset. "What will you do if they try to force you to give her up?"

"Then I will." Remy surprised himself at his answer.

"Why?" Minerva asked.

Remy decided on the safer answer, for the other one raised more questions he didn't want to have to answer. "Do you wish to have to try and defend yourself from supernatural beings you have no way of identifying until it's too late?" He met Carson's eyes. "Or have Miss Rey Lafitte's more unusual friends pay a visit to us as they did to Leopold?"

"Would the werewolves do that?" Minerva asked, her expression skeptical.

"They are her allies," Remy said, "and she told me she would do everything in her power to destroy me should I harm Mizuko."

"You respect her." Minerva watched Remy's face.

"Yes, I do." At first, Remy would have to admit, he thought of Rey as a potential asset, or even a liability, in his quest to get Mizuko for himself. After seeing what she could do, knowing what she endured and how she overcame it, he couldn't help but realize how formidable an opponent she would be. He would much rather have her as an ally than an enemy.

After a brief period of poking around, the trio found an unlocked door along the side of the auditorium building. It was dark inside, but several small ovals of light shone from the floor of the stage. They were of the battery-operated sort that people put in closets, hallways or porches to provide light where there was no electricity. The soft, yellow glow bathed the stage in diffuse light that was easy on the eyes.

The deep, indigo colored curtains created a midnight backdrop for the stage, while a large, oval mirror stood on an ornate wheeled stand. Before this mirror stood a number of wooden chairs with a single, scarlet cushion. Five chairs faced the mirror and one single chair, which was occupied by the Legate of Mists. She rose to her feet when Remy and his companions entered and remained standing while they climbed the stairs up to the stage.

Mizuko looked dressed more to go out than for a formal occasion, at least to the eye of Remy's companions. She had no formal evening gowns other than the one that was ruined at Twelfth Night so instead she wore a dark colored ensemble that leant her hypnotically attractive features a dangerous edge. She wore tight black pants that shone in the soft light, another benefit of one of Amber's five fingered discounts, and a sleeveless top that had a mostly open back. It showed skin but not enough to be entirely distracting. For jewelry she wore those same silver cross necklaces she wore when Remy first met her. To Minerva and Carson, Mizuko appeared as an exceptionally attractive, mature for her age young woman, but Remy saw her for the true nymph of the forgotten sea that she was.

Most immediately noticeable to Remy was her hair had been cut short in an asymmetrical style that left her with bangs slashed diagonally above her eyebrows, and an attractive yet uneven bob that drew the eye.

Mizuko curtsied deeply to the three vampires, complete with both body language and her eyes. Then she spoke, *"Thank you for taking the time to meet with the Queen Veridia of the Ashen Court."*

"We were honored at the invitation," Remy replied with an elegant bow, which was repeated by Carson, with Minerva executing an perfect curtsy.

Mizuko paused a moment as if listening to something, then said, *"Tonight my queen has instructed me, as her Legate, to act as her voice in all negotiations. She invites you to join her through this mirror, a Gate between our worlds."* Mizuko gestured with her hand toward the huge mirror behind her and looked intently at Remy, making an almost imperceptible negative motion with point of her chin.

"I'm afraid that is an invitation we must decline," Remy replied politely, who had no intention of going through that mirror even if Mizuko hadn't tried to warn him. "What I know of your world tells me it is far too dangerous for our kind, and we have no wish to tread its paths." And it was true, both literally and figuratively. He did not want to go walking through the thorns he'd seen through the gate at the faire, nor did he want to get too involved with the Desert Duchy. The politics of his own kind were treacherous enough.

Mizuko smiled and bowed. *"Our Court, sometimes also called the Leaden Mirror is so called for our willingness to travel this world and others. While the Paths and Trods of the thorned Hedge that separates these worlds can be dangerous, they also hold tremendous advantage in that they connect points in this world outside of time and space. Friends and Allies of the Queen may well realize the advantages these hidden Paths provide, particularly in moving from city to city."*

Secret paths, Remy thought. Those could be very useful.

Mizuko then raise her hand up high and touched the center of the mirror. The surface rippled as if made of water, then became transparent. *"The Ashen Queen."* Mizuko turned to face the mirror and knelt as the image stabilized. A cold breeze blew out from the now open portal, bringing the scent of fall. Within the arching grove of bushy hedges that grew far taller than the mirror itself stood a figure slightly smaller even than Mizuko herself. She was as pale and ruby-lipped as any vampire, her coal-black hair was worn long while her equally, inhumanly black eyes looked upon her guests with glittering intelligence. She took a step to the portal and a wave of terror fluttered in the hearts of those present. Every vampire in the room could swear she was as dead — and undead — as they were, yet had somehow cheated the Curse. She smiled to see their eyes widen, revealing unnaturally sharp canines.

Then she stepped out of the mirror-gate and onto the stage floor. The Mirror went black and suddenly the dark queen looked like a dark-haired, petite woman dressed in a fine evening gown.

Remy and his companions stood as still as death, eyes narrowed, wondering what they had walked into and if they'd walk away unscathed.

To Remy's surprise, Mizuko also seemed merely mortal once more. Then he recalled the promise they'd made and the small obligation to which he had agreed.

Veridia took the seat facing the vampires and Mizuko rose to her feet. Mizuko turned and crossed the 20 feet between Veridia and the other vampires, stopping in a place that left Veridia in full view of her guests.

Remy bowed silently to Veridia once more. When he straightened, he sent a look to Mizuko letting her know he'd realized his error.

Mizuko looked back at him, sadness unmistakable in her eyes for a moment.

Then she steeled her gaze and looked upon the three vampires present. *"As the queen initiated this meeting, she is pleased to present the first gift. If you accept the offer, she would like a complete answer to a single question."*

Remy nodded. *"As your guests, we are pleased to follow your lead, you majesty,"* he said, directing his words and gaze to Veridia.

Mizuko seemed to listen a moment, then jerked as if surprised, half-turning back toward Veridia before she caught herself. *"Ah ... the queen has investigated your actions of the past three months and is both pleased and impressed with the way you have all comported yourselves toward several of her subjects. While your motives for doing so remain a mystery to us, the queen nevertheless wishes to show appreciation where it is due. She understands that in coming here tonight and behaving as was expected of you, you have broken a promise to me and that she knows the nature of this promise."* Mizuko's cheeks were a little redder than normal, her brow a little shinier as she paused again.

*"The Legate offers you the same pledge again, but to include all your motley that you might know us, and this time the Legate will not restrict you to seeing only her own true form, but that of all changelings."* Mizuko stood very still, barely daring to breathe.

"I do not wish to appear ungrateful, but may I ask a question before we give our answer?" Remy asked.

Mizuko nodded on the queen's behalf.

"I have the utmost respect for the Legate, but I do not wish to enter into any such agreement if it is against her free and uninfluenced will."

Mizuko thought rapidly. If the vampires refused the gift then the meeting would likely end here, and if they refused, would she be blamed for the failure? *"It's the Legate's duty to carry the Queen's word and her will by proxy. Being the Legate is what she wants — what I always wanted."* Mizuko smiled encouragingly. *"Accept the gift, Remy. Should you decide it is unfair, the pledge can be broken without consequence save for the gifts inherent to it will disappear. But please understand that this is both a symbol of trust and a test."* By that she meant that Veridia was willing to trust his people with the ability to see through the Mask, the primary mechanism for the protection of her people, and a test to see that he would not abuse that trust.

Of course to Mizuko, the pledge had several more dimensions. She had to trust they would not abuse the favor she would owe for the magic of the kiss they must give her in exchange.

Remy turned to speak with Carson and Minerva, and explained the benefits of the pledge, and what they must do to get it. "It is a little thing," he finished, but it is something I think we should do." After a moment, both of his friends nodded, for they trusted Remy's decision on this. He turned back to Veridia.

"We accept your gift with great appreciation." Remy remembered what Mizuko had told him about the implications of thanking one of the fae. He'd warned the others about it, and Carson had expressed some dismay because he remembered something he'd said to Rey. Remy was unable assure him that Rey would not take advantage of the situation, and that left Carson disturbed.

*"Please repeat the words that once bound this promise and shall again. 'I wish to see you as you truly are. I will keep your secrets as you keep mine and in return, give you a kiss the first time we speak face to face.'"*

She waited for them to repeat the words, then she responded, *"I swear to this promise and offer in addition to it a small favor to each of you."* Mizuko invoked a small thrill of glamour that swept through the gathered vampires, surprising them with a vivid, if temporary rush.



There was a long pause after that. Mizuko turned to her queen to find Veridia staring at her. The ghost that had been working for Veridia, telling Mizuko what Veridia intended her to say swept invisibly back and forth.

You modified the basic ensorcellment pledge, Veridia accused via the ghostly whisper. Mizuko nodded. That was the pledge you had with Remy? The Legate nodded again.

Veridia sat back in her chair and sighed. She waved for Mizuko to continue and the Legate turned to face Remy and his friends again.

*"As agreed, then this is Veridia's question. What ambition most drives you, Remy Deprez?"*

Remy thought for a moment before he spoke. "I want to protect my people. To do that, I must rule them."

Mizuko nodded once toward Remy then turned to face her queen. She stood still for a long time, then turned back to Remy. *"The queen is satisfied with your answer. Have you any issue you wish to present?"*

"For myself, not at the moment," Remy said, "but I would like to know in what way you believe my friends and I would be of assistance to you, your majesty."

Mizuko paused, then said, *"But you already have been."*

The queen stood then and the mirror behind her rippled as she prepared to leave. Mizuko turn to face her and curtsied again.

If Remy had been sitting, he would have stood. As it was, he stayed politely where he was, though he looked around for signs of where the queen's bodyguard might be.

In a moment Veridia was gone and Mizuko was looking at a normal mirror once more.

"How was she speaking to you, Mizuko?" Remy asked.

Mizuko turned and signed to Remy, "We each have our domains. For me, it is water and ice. For Rey, the beasts and the wild. For the queen... it is the dead who pay her heed. Death and madness. She told me something as she left, too. She said that Rey's wolf-brothers made a ghost of that vampire.

"And that ghost is not Leopold."

Remy frowned. "If that is true, then we are in trouble." He looked at Carson and Minerva. "We have to find him."

Mizuko found an empty chair and sat down with some relief.

"I'll call Wilson and Annabeth," Carson said, pulling a cell phone out of his jacket pocket.

Minerva closed the distance between herself and Mizuko. "Are you alright?"

Mizuko's hands fluttered, then she said, *"I'm fine."* But the look in her eyes revealed the fading haunt of a real scare; she'd been afraid she'd lose her title and possibly more if she'd mishandled this. *"You got me through this. All of you. The queen is satisfied I'm not your slave, for now."*

"Then we must make sure she has no cause to do so in the future," Remy said. "I wonder how she 'investigated' us."

Mizuko shook her head. *"She has the means to learn many things, depending on what she is willing to do. As you know others of us can."* Mizuko looked at Remy meaningfully.

Remy smiled. "Very true." He looked around. "Your queen likes drama."

Mizuko made a face and rolled her eyes, then said, *"Well, Remy, she is a queen."*

Remy and Minerva laughed. "Do you have plans for tonight, ma petite?" Remy asked once the laughter faded.

Mizuko smiled shyly and signed, "I had made no plans at all beyond this."

"It would be shame to have gone through all the effort to look good tonight for it to go to waste, don't you think?" Remy said.

"Indeed," Minerva replied. "Where shall we go?" she asked Mizuko.

Mizuko brightened. She signed, "I haven't been to a movie theater since I was little, but I remember them being fun."

"What do you think, Minerva?" Remy asked. "A late show?"

"You paying?" Minerva grinned. "Then by all means, let's go."