

Rey sighed as she flipped a the page of the report she was proof reading. Another piece of the endless paperwork that had to be done for the various agencies the casino had to comply with. She could have just passed the responsibility on to her assistant, but since she was signing off on it, she wanted to make sure everything was the way it was supposed to be.

It had been a long, very busy week, and she was tired. It was Thursday, which meant only one more day until the weekend when she could relax. Rey was just thinking about what she might do when the phone on her desk rang. She picked it up without looking at the display. "Rey Lafitte."

"Hi, it's Marie," said the woman on the phone. "I'm sorry to call you at work, but I couldn't remember your usual hours."

"Hi!" Rey couldn't help but smile, and it could be heard in her voice. "It's no problem. I tend to work usual business hours, nine to five. What's up?"

"I just finished a project and had a little time on my hands, so I thought I'd call and see if you'd like to go out for drinks tonight?"

"Sure, why not," Rey replied. "Do you have somewhere in mind?"

"Yeah, there is a place I like to hang out with the gang sometimes. It's called Sticks?"

"I haven't heard of it. What's the uniform there?" Rey asked.

Marie chuckled, "Casual. It's a working person's kind of bar."

"Gotcha. See you at seven?" That'd give Rey time to change and get there without rushing.

"Yeah, that'd be great!" Marie gave Rey an address that put the bar somewhere in south central Mythic City.

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When Rey walked into Sticks, it was already pretty busy and the source of its name was obvious - it was part pool hall, part bar. A full half the place was dominated by pool tables, and she could see two dart boards off in a corner. The rest of the bar was filled with tables and chairs, and tonight every stool along the bar was occupied.

She was glad she'd taken Marie's words to heart about what to wear. With her jeans, t-shirt and worn leather jacket she fit right in, and she'd hardened her Mask to help her play the part of being human. Her sister's description of the place was accurate - it was obvious the people here worked for a living. Guys in suits had abandoned their ties and jackets to drink a pint with construction worker.

Rey looked around but didn't see Marie, so she found a seat at an empty table. Slinging her jacket over the back of her chair, she felt eyes on her, scoping her out. It was something she was used to, and for the most part, she simply accepted it. There was no way she could sit with her back to the wall, so she positioned herself at her table so that she was mostly facing the door.

When Marie arrived, she'd taken her time getting to the bar, and then took a little time making her way toward Rey's table. She waved when she came in, but it seemed she knew many of the folks here. Marie stopped and chatted with several women and a few men on her way, then grabbed a couple drinks off the bar that the 'tender had poured for her, gave the bartender a half-salute and then wound her way finally to Rey's table. She set down an American brown bottle in front of Rey, then plopped into a chair and took the other for herself.

"Hi Rey!" Marie said cheerily. "Shelly thought you were me when you came in," she nodded toward the bartender, "but figured it out when you didn't come say hi." Marie grinned.

"I guess that's going to be happening a lot now," Rey replied with a grin of her own. "If I stray from my usual stomping ground, that is. You know a lot of people here, I see."

Marie nodded. "Oh yeah, I've done work for some of them, and know others from around."

Rey took a drink of her beer. "Thanks again for the invite. I don't get out nearly as much as I should." She laughed. "All work and no play makes Rey cranky."

Marie smiled. Like Rey, she was an attractive woman, but when she smiled it lent a magnetic charm to her. "I'm glad you came. And this is the first time I've really seen you as other people do. I almost didn't recognize you except you look a lot like me — and that." She pointed to the wall behind Rey where her shadow stood out. It wasn't the shadow of a mortal woman, but that of a bramble-wrapped female fae.

"Yeah, well, no disguise is perfect," Rey said with a little shrug. "I usually get completely dressed up like this when I'm going to be spending time around, well, normal people. Sometimes it's a good reminder of where I am." She chuckled. "And it sure as heck makes it easier to put on make up properly." She looked at her sister's face. "I guess you get an idea of how I felt when I saw you at the door. Almost like looking in a mirror."

Marie nodded and took a drink from her beer. Rey noticed her fingernails were trimmed neatly and clean, but then she noticed a few small spots of stain on her fingers. "Yet the truth is we are so different now, that it's only an illusion we look alike, right?"

"I don't think so," Rey replied. "If I hadn't been Taken, what you see now is what I'd look like - and what you'll look like - in three years." The corners of her mouth twitched in amusement. "I'd like to think I've aged well."

"But we're supposed to be the same age," Marie protested.

"I know that," Rey said, "but time can pass differently in Arcadia. Three years passed for me when I was there, but only 3 months passed here."

"Arcadia," Marie repeated thoughtfully. "Why go there? Were you looking for something?"

"No," Rey replied, her voice though her face was composed. "I was Taken. Literally dragged there by my hair, kicking and screaming the entire way."

"Why?"

"I was trying to help some friends, and eventually summoned a being who could answer my questions." Rey's composure cracked a little. "After He answered my question, He thought it would be instructional to turn a hedge witch into part of the hedge in His garden." She took a long slow drink, fighting to keep her hands from shaking with the rage that flared in her.

Marie watched Rey in silence for a while. "I take it that what he did to you changed you. So this guy you summoned. Was he some kind of demon?"

"I guess you could call Him that." Rey set her bottle down. "Imagine a being with all the powers of a god, but with no concept of ethics or morals, let alone a drop of humanity."

"It does sound like an old god. Many of them weren't nice at all. You must have been pretty desperate to call

up something like that."

"I was," Rey admitted, "though I had no idea of the exact nature of what would answer the ritual. As horrific as the entire experience was, I'd do it again if it meant saving someone I cared about. At the time, they were the closest to family I had."

Marie nodded. "I'm sorry if I brought up painful memories."

"Don't worry about it," Rey said with a little wave of her hand. "We can't change the past, so we ought to try and learn from it and move on." Her head tilted sideways a bit as she regarded her twin. "How did you end up becoming ensorcelled, able to see through the Mask?"

"Ensorcelled?" Marie frowned. "That's an odd phrase." She shook her head. "I can see through what you call the Mask by a blessing from my goddess." She paused to watch Rey's reaction carefully. Most people didn't react well to the idea that gods and goddesses (other than the culturally approved God) were real. Her sister had been through some things, but that didn't mean she believed in the things Marie did.

"Goddess?" Rey asked curiously as her mind whirled. As far as she knew, only a Changeling or other fae could ensorcell people. If it was a Changeling, claiming to be a goddess....

"Yes. I'm one of Her priestesses," Marie confirmed. She took another drink from her beer, set it down with a thump and smiled.

"Ishtar?" Rey hazarded a guess.

"That's the one. Goddess of love and war." She sat back. "How did you guess?"

"I've heard she's been active in the area," Rey replied. An interesting tidbit of information, Rey thought. Something to pass along to Veridia, and to see if Less knows about it.

"Really? From who?" Marie asked.

"I met some women at Tyrone Hamilton's who I'm pretty sure were her priestesses too," Rey explained. "I was wearing my other face at the time, so there was no way they'd have confused us."

"Well, there are a good number of us. Well, not all of us are actual priestesses but the blessing was given to all her faithful so that we could see."

"See what?" Rey asked.

"Her. I mean, She already looked pretty much like a goddess to us anyway, but She wanted us to be able to see Her in Her true form. She told us the blessing would allow us to see through the Lie, but that it was a simple one and would not pierce all such Lies. I guess other creatures hide in plain sight as well, but it's more complex to detect them. She's begun teaching us methods to see them as well so that we can avoid trouble. Which is a really good thing given what happened last summer."

"What happened?" Rey wondered how much Marie knew was going on in the Desert Duchy.

"Serial killer around last April through June went around killing every witch he could find. Hit the community pretty hard. We all went to ground as best we could and then... well it just stopped." Marie finished her beer then said, "If we are gonna have this deep of a conversation, I'm going to need something stronger."

It took Rey just a moment to realize why the serial killer had suddenly stopped. She was pretty sure it was

the crazed Hunter who'd taken Mizuko's friends. She ordered another drink, suitably strong, for both of them and waited for Marie to feel ready to continue the story.

"Nobody really knew how it was happening. Friends would just disappear and when we tried to get a read on them, they'd be gone. Killed by some maniac. Is that a martini?" Marie picked it up and took a sip, then sighed luxuriously. "Thanks. Anyway, where was I? Maniac. Right. Well, eventually the kidnapping and killing stopped. Word on the network was that he'd been stopped. We started our gatherings again. You know, talking shop only with ah, other witches. Are you okay with me being a witch?"

"Considering I used to be one," Rey said, "it'd be rather hypocritical of me to be, don't you think?"

Marie looked curious. "Used to be? What did you do, retire or something? Or do you just not believe anymore?"

"No," Rey shook her head. "When I was dragged off, I lost the ability to do that magic. The most frustrating thing is that I remember how to do it, but simply don't have the power for it anymore."

"Being a witch isn't just about throwing the evil eye around and shapeshifting into a cat, you know," Marie said with a smile. "It's about what you believe, what you know is true, and celebrating that."

"I was never able to shapeshift into a cat, but I suspect my beliefs were, and are, different than yours. There's nothing wrong with that." Rey chuckled. "However, to some people, I am *the* Witch. The Witch of the Bitter Wind, expert on the occult."

Marie nodded triumphantly. "There now, see? Once a witch, always a witch."

Rey took another sip of her drink. "I know why the serial killer stopped, and who did it." She watched Marie's face for her reaction.

Marie looked at her very steadily and waited for Rey to continue.

"My friends and I did it," Rey said. "He'd kidnapped some of Mizuko's friends. We got there too late to save them all, but his soul's in hell now." A nasty little smile danced on Rey's lips.

Marie raised her glass. "To just desserts." Rey returned her salute and drank to the toast. She remembered the taste of the man's blood, thick and acrid in her mouth. Looking back on it, it was disgusting. She took another sip of her drink as if trying to clear the taste from her mouth.

"So, what do you usually do on a weeknight?" Rey asked, turning the subject to one that was potentially more enjoyable.

"Weeknight?" Marie laughed. "I suppose it is. I'm a contractor. Carpentry. So, I take jobs where I get them and work until they are done. After that, any day of the week can be a weekend."

"So, if you had your choice of things to do, anything you want, what would it be right now?"

"This. Spending some time getting to know my sister," Marie said and finished her martini.

"Same here," Rey said. "But I'm not sure I want to spend the entire night here. Are there other places you like to go and hang out?"

"Oh. Well, I often go and hang out with my friends at their club unless I'm in the mood for a man. We could go there, but..." she eyed Rey, "getting there is a little bit of an adventure for some people."

"An adventure?" Rey said with a smile, knowing what club Marie was likely talking about. "I'm always up for that. I'd like to meet some of your friends too."

"Okay. I doubt anyone I know will be there this early, but we can go there later after I make a couple calls."

Marie paused as she shifted mental gears. "You mentioned Mizuko had friends that the killer had gotten to. Might they have been anyone I knew?"

"I don't know," Rey replied honestly. "They were some homeless girls she used to hang around with."

"Homeless?" Marie looked concerned. "I didn't know she was homeless." Marie reflected on her rather brief acquaintance with her.

"Oh, Mizuko isn't anymore," Rey hastened to say. "With some help from me and some other friends, she was able to find a job and a place to live. She's doing pretty well now."

"That's good for her." Marie added, "She looks like quite the little nymph. Straight out of books on fairytales, really. Is she for real?" She gave Rey a suggestive look.

"A sexy looking water elf? Yes, that she is," Rey said, "but I don't think she takes on all comers if that's what you want to know. She's seeing a guy in Santa Fe and as far as I know, he's the only one in her bed."

"Good for her if she's seeing a guy," Marie agreed amicably. "I just wondered if she might be interested in meeting some of my friends, too. Your friends and mine might have as many things in common as you and I do."

"Maybe. I could call her and find out if you like, or should we do that some other time?"

"That's up to you. For me, this is my Friday night. I don't have to be at work tomorrow and a little party sounds fun. But if you can't I understand."

"I'll see if I can get a hold of her. This could be fun." Rey pulled her cell phone out and dialed the number for Mizuko's apartment. Marie did the same to call her friends.

Mizuko answered right away. Rey hadn't seen her in almost a week but she sounded... actually happy and sociable. It was weird. "Hi Rey! I see your name on the phone! Amber programmed it."

"Now I can't surprise you anymore," Rey said with a laugh. "I'm crushed. Listen, are you busy tonight? Marie and I might be hitting a club and meeting up with some of her friends, and she thought you might like to join us."

"Yes, I would like to do that," Mizuko replied with enthusiasm. "I don't have to work on busy nights at Corazon's anymore. I was just watching these little TVs with Mr. Fiskel but it was a whole lot like watching paint dry. I came back up here to see if I had enough money to go out and then you called. You have really good timing, Rey. Where should I meet you all?"

Rey looked at Marie and held the phone away from her mouth. "When and where should she meet us?"

Marie gave Rey an address for a club.

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Rey made a quick trip home to change into something a bit nicer to wear. A short skirt with a simple, tight t-shirt and high heel, a quick reinforcing of her Mask, a quick application of makeup and putting her hair up and she was ready to go.

The club was, as Rey had thought, the Blood Tears Club. Entry seemed like it was going to be a problem, however. First of all, they told her that if she wasn't a couple, then she needed to be sponsored and get a statement from a physician that she was free of any STDs. Rey managed to talk them into "just visiting" status, which meant she had to wear a blue sticker somewhere prominent which meant she was not to take part in sexual activities, but she still needed a sponsor to be allowed in.

Mizuko arrived during this time, dressed in cloths that certainly passed for club wear. She wore a nearly scandalously short, stretchy skirt and a top with more holes than material and obviously no bra under her winter coat (which was immediately discarded at the door). Her eyes were especially bright and lively tonight, and a little smile was undaunted by the stonewalling at the door. Note only did the doorman and his female manager both end up stammering and tripping over words as they practically drooled over her, patrons further inside that drift by couldn't resist a look.

To Rey's modest disgust, her friend was really stealing the attention. Then Mizuko pulled the most unfair trick of all; she opened her mouth and spoke.

"Oh please?" Mizuko said, her eyes genuine and innocent. "I swear on everything I hold dear that both of us are clean, good people."

Spellbound, the doorman and his manager tried to mutter denials but they lacked any conviction and Rey began to think, much to her irritation, that Mizuko was going to get her way based on her looks alone and for no other reason than that.

But it was Marie who's late arrival salvaged things. Still dressed in her button-down shirt (now unbuttoned far enough to reveal a delicious slice of breast and new lack of undershirt or bra) and tight blue jeans, she approached speaking a little loudly, "She's sponsored, they're both sponsored. They are with me. Hey dummy, give her ID back and anyway wasn't it obvious she's my sister?"

The doorman reddened and looked back at the ID, noting the name. "Oh uh... I — I was just about to let them through..."

Marie's cheeks were flushed from the evening's drinks so far and she was a little wobbly but she hugged Rey, then snagged the blue sticker, crumpled it up and tossed it to the floor. Then she hugged Mizuko too. The nymph was surprised but smiled and returned the hug.

Rey couldn't help but smile, but she silently promised herself to keep an eye on Marie, especially if she had anything more to drink. Once they were further inside, Rey said to her sister "I hope you won't get into trouble for getting rid of that sticker."

The trio proceeded into the club proper. No one here was alone. There was a bar, a dance floor, tables and club lighting, but of course dance and conversation was not the primary focus of a sex club. Also, neither Mizuko nor Rey noted the furniture first.

"Whoa!" Mizuko exclaimed, freezing. Rey knew what she was talking about. Every man in the place was completely naked. Several of the women were as well, but it appeared the no-clothing rule was optional for women. "Okay, some of these guys should not be naked. But... wow, look at that guy! I think I can count every ab."

Marie laughed. "Yeah. Like I said. It's Ladies' Night. C'mon. The others are waiting for us downstairs."

"Mizuko, if you're a really good girl, then maybe you'll be able to play later," Rey said with a laugh. She took her friend's hand and tugged at it, but when she didn't move, she wrapped her arm around Mizuko's waist to make sure she moved. That didn't mean, however, she ignored the scene - seeing that many naked people all at once was a surprise, but nudity hadn't been a problem for Rey for years.

Mizuko stared openly at several of the young men there and more than a few met that stare with suggestive winks and grins of their own. Despite Mizuko's suddenly raging libido, Rey managed to follow Marie (who had somehow made another martini appear in one hand) while propelling Mizuko through a door and down stairs to a basement level. They passed a women's restroom and came to a door labeled Private, but Marie pushed on through, then took an immediate right through an unmarked door.

The trio found themselves in a large room lit by scented candles and decorated with three small but very comfortable couches sheer fabrics served as wall hangings, gave the room a warm feel and managed practicality by absorbing sound. At one end of the room was a tall narrow stand. It had several objects on it including a twelve inch idol resembling a Babylonian goddess (Rey guessed Ishtar), a couple ornately carved wands made of stained cherry, a little crystal pyramid, and a few bundles of herbs. Outside noise was very effectively muted here.

Two women who had been seated on the couch rose to their feet and each gave Marie a welcoming hug. Marie introduced the tall thin brunette wearing a one-piece lbd as Aurra, and the younger woman with shorter brown hair in black jeans and a leather vest as Yvonne. After introductions were made, they also shared hugs with Rey and Mizuko.

"You've got quite a place here," Rey said, referring to both the club above and the room they were in. She felt comfortable here, and it was in stark contrast with the club upstairs.

Aurra smiled. "Thank you, Rey. It's ... really just a hobby."

Yvonne grinned. "We noticed that no one really wants to look too deep at a sex club, if they look at all. It's a great cover for our little get-togethers. Besides, Aurra is filthy rich. She needs something to do her money anyway. Wow. Look at you two."

Aurra was looking as well. Rey of course looked mortal to them, but Mizuko certainly was looking every inch the alluring siren she was. Mizuko smiled proudly. "*So you can really see us?*"

"You, yes," Aurra put in. "You are... very special. Obviously ... special. And Rey, you look so much like our Marie that it's striking." By the way she said the word 'special', Rey could tell Aurra was intrigued.

The corners of Rey's mouth twitched and she glanced at Marie. "Not really surprising given we're twins."

"It's the hair, I think," Yvonne put in, "that really sets the two of you apart."

Mizuko, already distracted, was looking at the hanging plentiful cloth adorning the walls. She touched it, then grabbed the material in her hand. She wore a pleased smile as she explored it.

If you only knew how different my hair was from Marie's, Rey thought. She took a step toward the makeshift altar. "May I?" she asked. "I promise not to touch."

Yvonne glanced at Aurra, then Marie. Marie said, "Sure, it's okay."

While Rey examined the altar, Aurra stepped up to Mizuko's side and murmured something quietly.

The first thing that drew Rey's attention on the altar was the idol. It appeared to be a fairly generic kind of thing, something that might have been purchased at a store. Although the perfectly smooth, too-perfect image revealed it as manufactured instead of handmade, it was still a charming piece. The figure itself displayed a Middle Eastern woman, which made sense for a Babylonian goddess. Although the attire was classic, the style and proportions of the figure itself were more aesthetically modern. Rey noted that although it was probably manufactured, the idol did appear to be hand painted.

She suspected the "better" stuff - a nicer idol and more personal touches - wouldn't be found out in the open at the club like this. They were either tucked away somewhere in the room, or might be brought here for specific rituals or group work. Her curiosity satisfied, Rey turned back to Marie and Yvonne. "How long have the three of you been friends?" she asked.

Aurra laughed at something Mizuko said or did and drifted toward a small refrigerator that doubled as a lamp stand next to a couch. She crouched and retrieved a tall, thin bottle of wine that appeared a very pale yellow through the clear glass container.

Marie addressed Rey's question. "We met around the time of the trouble. Last April or May. Aurra had been making contacts among our people. Just those we could trust. Small-time witches. Neo-pagans with a touch of talent. People working alone were very vulnerable to the kind of attacks that were happening. Aurra and Yvonne both started to reach out, invite people to get together and share information."

Aurra stood up and added, "No big-time supernatural beings. Just us mortals. We have tried to avoid the major powers out there because let's be honest. Most of us know enough to get into serious trouble, but that's about it. If a vampire catches scent of us or werewolf decides to add one of us to their... herds they keep, there won't be much we can do about it. At least, not alone."

Marie nodded. "So it was basic survival at first. But with a bunch of us together talking, sharing experiences, and eventually even doing rituals when someone really needed help, it helped bring a sense of community. A sense we weren't alone in a very scary world."

Aurra got some narrow wine glasses out. "Mizuko and I are going to have a drink. Icewine anyone?"

The mention of the wine reminded Rey of Hallowe'en, of Richard and that fact she missed him. His work for Veridia kept him very busy so they weren't able to see each other as often as they'd like. She hoped, though, they'd be able to spend some time together this weekend. "Please, but just a little bit," she replied to Aurra.

"You're lucky to have found people with similar beliefs," Rey said to Yvonne and Marie. "I used to be a sole practitioner myself."

"So, you have a coven now?" Marie asked.

"Not as such," Rey admitted, thinking of the Lord Sages and the Desert Duchy, "I act more as a... consultant now."

Her sister pressed, "So why do you refer to yourself as a witch in the past tense?"

"We've had this conversation earlier," Rey said with a rueful laugh, "and I think perhaps our definitions of what a witch is differ."

"I'm not so sure. You said to some people you were called a Witch and it sounded like a title, not a derogative. You said you used to be a hedge witch as well." Marie shrugged. "It's okay if that's not what you see yourself as anymore. I just hope you don't mind if the rest of us don't agree."

Mizuko had watched the exchange with an amused expression on her face, but she remained silent. Aurra

passed around glasses of the sweet dessert wine and then suggested everyone have a seat on one of the couches.

Rey caught Mizuko's eye and lifted an inquiring eyebrow. "What's so funny, Mizuko?" she asked as she sat. She wasn't angry or upset, but definitely curious as to what her friend was thinking.

Mizuko put her glass down, then signed in Glymjack, "You. You are splitting hairs that don't exist. The term 'witch' is so vague it covers anything from a woman who uses magic to a person who holds Western pagan beliefs, be it modern or by old family tradition. Your sister is just trying to connect with you and you are doing whatever you can to distance yourself. You are being silly."

Rey laughed again, this time at herself. "How true." She shook her head. "Mizuko just pointed out I'm being something of a fool, though that's my words, not hers. I'm sorry, Marie."

Marie brightened and laughed. "Oh, well don't take me too seriously. I've been drinking pretty steady all night." She raised her glass. "To friends that keep us honest?"

The other two witches smiled and raised their glasses. Mizuko pondered that then nodded and raised hers as well. Rey joined the others in the toast and savored the taste of the icewine. Though she'd only had it twice, she was really becoming to like it.

Mizuko finally sat down on a couch. Marie sat next to Rey, Aurra next to Mizuko and Yvonne took the remaining love seat alone.

"So, are you seeing anyone?" Marie asked Rey.

"Yes, I am," Rey replied with a happy (not to mention satisfied) smile. "Richard. The really big guy you met at my place on Christmas Day. How about you?"

"Not really," Marie said.

Yvonne put in, "But Marie, what about that one guy you mentioned?"

"Carson? Oh, we aren't serious or anything. We have a good time here and there is all."

Mizuko looked puzzled, so Aurra helped her out. "They have sex without commitment."

That appeared to be an explanation Mizuko understood because she smiled and nodded.

"Have you forgiven him yet?" Rey asked with a grin.

Marie gave Rey a wry look. "For which infraction?"

Rey laughed. "I was thinking about the kiss, but how many are on the list now?"

"Mistaking me for you, and calling me by my first name again — two night ago. I'd swear he does these things on purpose." Marie said crossly but without real conviction. "As a matter of fact, I don't think I'm going to see him anymore."

Yvonne pointed out, "You've said that before."

Marie smiled ruefully. "Yeah. I guess I have. Well, he really works his ass off to make it up to me when he screws up. He gives me those sad, so-sorry eyes and does whatever I demand of him to make up for his transgressions, and then I give in again. I blame my hormones. It's not my fault, really."

Rey was looking at her sister but caught motion out of the corner of her eye. Mizuko signed something, but she didn't catch what her friend said. She was pretty sure that Mizuko slipped and used ASL instead of Glymjack, something Mizuko did on occasion.

"Your first name isn't that all that bad," Rey said, then signed to Mizuko, "Sorry, I didn't catch what you said."

"Nothing important," Mizuko returned in Glymjack sign. "Though I wonder how many women Carson is seeing. I think I'll ask him next time I see him."

Yvonne said, "That isn't ASL. Is it something new?"

Aurra, who'd been politely listening, saw that Mizuko, Rey and Marie had already finished their wine, so she got up and collected them. She set them out of the way on top of the little refrigerator.

"Kind of," Rey replied. "It lets us talk a lot faster, which is good, because I'm kind of struggling with learning ASL. My fingers seem to have a mind of their own when I'm trying to learn by myself, though I'm hoping to find a beginner's class or something somewhere offered soon."

Aurra found that a little puzzling. "You mean Mizuko isn't teaching you?" She checked the fridge and noted they were out. The bottle of ice wine didn't go very far. She closed the door and looked between Mizuko and Rey, but Mizuko held out her hands helplessly and shrugged.

"Unfortunately," Rey said with a grimace, "Until recently, our schedules have kept us from getting together as often as we'd like." Then she chuckled. "I also was hoping to surprise Mizuko once I'd learned it. I guess the cat's out of the bag, huh?"

"Looks like we are out down here. I'm going to make a run upstairs to the bar. Any requests?" Aurra asked.

"Some water will be fine for me," Rey said.

As Marie was about to reply, her cell phone rang. She answered it without checking to see who it was.

"Marie." Carson's voice was all male, with undertones of hope. "How are you?"

"A little drunk, Carson." She rolled her eyes at the rest of the present company, a wry smile on her lips. "Thanks for getting my name right for a change."

Aurra shook her head with a tolerant sigh. She looked a question Yvonne, Marie and Mizuko.

"Oh," Yvonne said. "Sorry. Sloe gin fizz for me." Mizuko signed something and Yvonne laughed. "I suggest Sex on the Deck for Mizuko, then."

Marie smiled and asked, "What did she say?"

"She said she wanted a drink named after sex."

"No," Marie said, "sorry Carson. I was talking to the girls. What was that?"

"I was wondering if you would like to get together tonight?"

Marie's libido was recklessly raging, which was the norm for her when she'd been drinking, so she said, "Sure, but right now I'm with some friends at the club."

"I'll meet you there," he replied easily.

"Great! See ya." After Carson said his goodbye, Marie hung up the phone and grinned like the cat who just ate the mouse.

Aurra caught the look and said, "Oh, lord. Anyway, I'll get the drinks."

Mizuko stood, then followed Aurra, deciding she'd help.

Yvonne remarked. "Marie? Does he know it's Ladies Night?"

Marie smugly replied, "I really doubt it. I think we should move upstairs. Is the party room open?"

Yvonne nodded. "Last I knew it was."

Rey had to admire Marie's little vicious streak. It certainly reminded her own, though it had been quite a while since she'd exercised it. "Could you tell me more about the club?" she asked. "I mean, I know it's a sex club, and I've heard you've got theme rooms or something, but that's about it."

Yvonne fielded these questions. "Yes. There are the Dungeon, the Pirate's cabin, the Doctor's office, and Arabian Nights. We used to have more, but Aurra had the rooms redone to make them bigger, and added cameras. Other rooms were eliminated to create a large party room or two. The reason was that last year there were concerns about things going on in the rooms that were edging toward being really unsafe. So, groups are encouraged, and sex in the open areas, too, so that members can keep an eye on each other. No one takes things too far. But, the four theme rooms are still available for use so long as members are okay with the cameras to be sure everyone is safe. Also, membership was changed to honor NASCA memberships, as well as local memberships. Couples only, or singles so long as they have a sponsor. That's for everyone's safety, too."

"What's the NASCA?"

"It's a national club for people into the swinging or lifestyle theme. Not all members of Blood Tears are members of NASCA, but all members of NASCA are welcome here," Yvonne said.

"Interesting," Rey said thoughtfully. A club like this would have Glamour galore, if you didn't mind the taste of lust. A virtual feast for someone who didn't mind being around naked strangers having sex. Which Rey really didn't.

"Well, the club up there isn't why most of the network comes here anyway, me included."

"Each to their own," Marie said. "Say, we should probably head upstairs. I don't want Carson finding us down here. It's supposed to be secret."

Just then, Rey's phone rang. It was Richard. She smiled, then told the others she'd be along in a minute before she answered the call.

They moved on upstairs. When Rey got back to her call, Richard said, "I hope I didn't catch you at a bad time, but I really think we should talk. About Twelfth Night."

Uh oh, Rey thought. "I'm out with some friends at a club." She looked out at the dance floor at all the naked bodies. "It's probably not a good place for a talk. Where would you like to meet?"

"Your place tomorrow night, if that's possible."

"That'd be fine," Rey replied. "I'll see you then." She put her phone away, and seeing Mizuko looking at her, signed, "That was Richard."

Mizuko handed her a water and eyed her own mysterious drink, while Aurra passed another couple drinks to Yvonne and Marie.

Mizuko kept her face averted from Rey.

Rey stared at the back of Mizuko's head, a frown settling over her face. She was wondering why her friend was avoiding looking at her when she realized the hair Rey thought Mizuko had pulled back into a pony tail wasn't there at all. It had been cut off, and into a very striking hairdo.. "Wow, Miz. I'm such an idiot. I didn't even notice your new haircut until now. It's really nice!"

Mizuko turned her face back to Rey, a smile replacing whatever had been there before. "You think so?" she signed. "I wanted a change and I had hoped to impressed somebody."

The other women took note and paid attention, eyeing and measuring the qualities of the short, asymmetrical style.

"It's really different from what you used to have," Rey commented, then smiled. "And who were you trying to impress?"

"*Remy,*" Mizuko said. "*But he didn't say anything. It's okay. At the time I was more worried that Richard might pop out from somewhere and kill me.*"

"Why would he-" Rey stopped in mid-sentence. "Oh shoot. That's why he wants to talk."

The group had found themselves at the bar. Aurra took Mizuko's arm and sat her down on a bar stool between herself and Yvonne. She asked Mizuko, "Are you okay?"

Mizuko nodded and smiled, then took a nice, long drink from her Sex on the Deck.

Marie asked Rey, "Why does your boyfriend want to kill Mizuko?"

"If he really does, then it's likely because he believes Mizuko - and by extension me - lied to him about Mizuko's boyfriend. Richard *really*' doesn't like who her boyfriend is." Rey sighed. To say any more would be to reveal too much, secrets that weren't hers to share.

"*It's okay, really,*" Mizuko assured them. "*Richard might not be happy, but I worked things out with the most important parties.*"

Her voice really was riveting. A naked, middle-aged man walking by and openly ogling the women blundered into a table.

"Um, maybe we should take this party upstairs?" Marie asked after shaking herself free from the nymph's siren song.

Important parties, Rey thought. That likely meant Veridia. That was good, until the queen decided she no longer had a use for Remy, which was the only reason Rey could think of for keeping Richard's axe away from Remy's neck. She doubted the queen really cared about personal relationships of the people loyal to her if it meant doing something for the betterment of the Court and the Duchy.

Rey frowned for a moment. Could Richard have come to some kind of agreement with Remy? She found that hard to believe, given Richard's opinion of vampires, but anything was possible, especially if the queen

ordered it.

As the four women made their way to the stairs to the second floor, Rey saw one of the security cameras. Carson seems to have no trouble coming here, or using the rooms, given the cameras are in them. Vampires, just as much as changelings and spirits, would find the people here useful for food, be it blood or essence through emotions. It was doubtful the vampires would want their actions recorded for posterity. What were the chances, she wondered, that those cameras weren't actually hooked up to anything. That it was security theater rather than something actually useful.

Aurra guided them all toward a large room, past a pair of couples engaged in enthusiastic sex with their partners on couches. A blonde woman with her skirt bunched up around her hips was straddling a somewhat overweight man and obviously engaged in the act looked up at the passing group and gave them a grin. Aurra, Yvonne and Marie didn't take much note, but Mizuko stared as she went by. Rey returned the grin with a bemused smile and kept walking.

It wasn't the only open display of sexual activity. The second floor had plenty of scattered couples enjoying themselves. Two of the four private rooms had "Occupied" signs on them. Aurra then opened a pair of double doors, swinging them wide, and revealing a room with a wide variety of furniture and decorated by fairly suggestive framed prints on the walls.

"You have a very interesting place here." Not in a million years had she thought she'd wind up walking around in a sex club. She suspected Richard would not be comfortable here, and that was fine with her. While she didn't care if someone watched or walked in on her, she wasn't an exhibitionist. Or at least she didn't think so.

Mizuko signed something, and Yvonne laughed. "Well, yes, it is pretty unusual for people to have sex where everyone can see them."

"Except in Blood Tears," Aurra said, catching on to what Mizuko had asked. "Members come here because it is one of the only places it is okay."

"I have to have to say the atmosphere here encourages it," Rey added. "Whether through the safety of the place, or the fact everyone else is doing it." She grinned, and signed to Mizuko, "You thinking of finding a way to bring Remy here?"

Mizuko signed back, "I could probably just ask. We've been here once before, when I watched Marie have sex with Carson thinking it was you. Over in that room, actually."

"That room?" Rey said aloud, looking in the direction her friend indicated, then signed again "does Marie know you and Remy were watching?"

"Remy said they both knew," Mizuko signed, "but that the game was to not be heard or seen. He made the game… challenging." Heat rose up from her core, coloring her cheeks.

"Oh do tell us what you two are talking about?" Aurra said, observing Mizuko.

Marie lurched and dropped down onto a couch, sloshing her drink a little. She was concerned about spilling and hadn't noticed the conversation.

Rey glanced at Marie. "Mizuko's been here before. We were talking about what she did, and it turns out she was in that room over there. She and her boyfriend watched a couple have sex."

Mizuko wondered if Remy really was her boyfriend. They'd never actually talked about it.

Aurra had listened, however, and glanced along Rey's line of sight then looked back at Rey with a little surprise. "Really?"

Rey nodded. "Miz's boyfriend said they knew, but..." She shrugged.

"Good evening, ladies." Rey turned her head and saw Carson approaching, naked as the day he was born. He was definitely a man who should be allowed to be naked. Carson had a sculpted body; every muscle defined, and his muscles weren't the only thing that was hard. He was at half-mast and showing increased interest.

Carson closed the distance between himself and the group and was about to grab Rey up in his arms when stopped dead in his tracks. His nostrils flared and panic flashed across his face. He took a step back as if nothing was wrong, took Rey's hand in his and lifted it to his lips. "A pleasure to see you, Rey."

"Just because you kissed me once," she replied, "doesn't give you the right to call me by my first name." Her expression was cool.

He froze for a moment, then a slow grin curved his lips. "You are a wicked witch, Miss Lafitte. I envy the man whom you choose."

The other women were all watching the exchange with amused expressions.

Yvonne said, "I'm sorry to run out on you all, but I've got class in the morning. It was good meeting you Rey and Mizuko." She smiled, waved, stole another look at Carson, and then headed out.

When she was gone, Marie waggled her finger at Carson from her place on a couch and said, "Carson! Put that thing away. You are scaring people off." She laughed.

"Oh, I don't know," Rey said, looking Carson over. "It certainly makes a convenient handle, don't you think?" She chuckled.

Carson's eyes narrowed and it was obvious her words didn't upset him, as he was now obviously ready to go full steam ahead.

Marie stood up and came over to Carson. She gave him a hug and a hungry, passionate kiss, then topped it off by giving his member a playful tug.

He growled softly and pressed against her, making sure he didn't leave her grasp.

Rey noticed Aurra drift over to a couch and sit gracefully. Mizuko looked a little lost, so she sat as well.

Aurra said, "You know, the two of you could get a room."

Carson glanced at the other women, then brushed his lips across Marie's ear as he whispered something to her. In response, she let her hands drift to his rump and squeezed him against her to punctuate something she whispered in return.

Whispered to her again, finishing his words with a gentle tug on her earlobe with his teeth.

After a startled moment, Marie looked at Mizuko and then Rey out of the corner of her eye, a naughty smile on her lips. She whispered something back, then released him and said, "I'm gonna use the ladies room. Be

right back." She took off, leaving Carson standing with Rey and Mizuko with Aurra watching from a couch, an amused expression on her face.

Carson watched Marie go, then turned to face Mizuko. He took two steps toward her and, his shaft twitching in anticipation, bowed to slightly. "Would you care to join us as you did before," he asked her politely, "and then, perhaps, participate afterwards?"

"I would not want to upset Remy," Mizuko said. "I haven't really been with any man but him and maybe he expects that to remain true." She hesitated, then said, "Of course if you were asking as a favor then I could not possibly refuse and he could not object."

"Since he brought you to watch once," Carson said, his voice slightly off, "I don't think it would be a problem. Do you want me to ask you as a favor?" Carson didn't want to offend Remy either, but Mizuko's suggestion put him at odds with that.

The nymph bowed, seeming submissive. "I would not deign to decide for you how to spend the favor I owe you. Although, I will warn you that as we speak you are in danger of losing that favor because you forget your promise."

Without skipping a beat, he closed the distance between them. He took her hand in his and a split second before his lips touched her fingers, he turned her hand over and placed a long, slow, intimate kiss to the inside of her wrist.

She didn't resist. She watched him with lips parted, and when the glamour rush arrived, she sighed pleasantly.

A satisfied smile covered Carson's face. He turned, and bowed slightly lower to Rey. "Miss Lafitte, would you care to join us as well, to watch, and then to play?" The thought of red-headed twins made his mouth water. Marie could be a wildcat. There was something very feral, almost animalistic about Rey, and he wondered if that would translate into her sexual behavior as well.

"I appreciate the invitation." Rey smiled. "But I have to decline. Watching someone else doesn't excite me, and I am seeing someone. It's not in my nature to stray."

Carson nodded, a bit disappointed but understanding. "Thank- I appreciate your honesty. I hope you enjoy the rest of your evening." He was relieved at catching himself before possibly putting himself more in debt to Rey, a thought that disturbed him.

Marie was going to ask Mizuko if she was going to come with them to the Arabian Nights room but saw the nymph was still standing there looking at her wrist. She smiled, knowing Carson had convinced her to come watch at least.

Aurra, meanwhile, had quietly watched it all unfold from her place on the couch. She sipped her drink carefully as she thought about what she'd seen and heard.

Rey joined Aurra on the couch with her tumbler of ice and water and made a shooing motion with her free hand. "Go on, have fun. I'll see you later." She smiled and laughed under her breath.

Carson extended his free hand to Marie, which she took. He led her to the Arabian Nights room, which was close by, and Mizuko followed. Marie paused in front of the door and aggressively shoved Carson against the wall and began ravaging him with kisses. Mizuko took the cue to enter the room ahead of them, then Carson picked Marie up, went inside, and nudged the door closed with his foot.

"Are Carson and Marie always like that?" Rey asked Aurra with a bemused shake of her head.

"In my experience? No. Just when Marie has been drinking and they are together. Separately, or if Marie hasn't been drinking, then not so much."

"Interesting." Rey took a sip of her water, wondering if Marie or her friends knew Carson was a vampire. "Aurra, I really appreciate the trust you placed in us, allowing Mizuko and I to meet you and Yvonne. I know how difficult it can be letting outsiders in."

"Marie leads the coven. It was her decision," Aurra said. It sounded to Rey like she implied that she hadn't chosen to trust Rey or Mizuko yet.

"Still, you didn't have to be here to greet us." Rey glanced at the woman next to her. "Did you?"

Aurra smiled. "I wouldn't have missed it. What about you? What do you think of Marie's friends?"

"You and Yvonne are the only ones I've met, and I like what I've seen so far." Rey weighed the pros and cons, and then decided to forge ahead. "Enough, anyway, to let you see my other face, if you want." Perhaps that, she thought, might put her a step closer to trust.

Aurra looked more interested. She put her glass aside. "I confess I had the impression you were hiding your true face because you didn't trust us. It's understandable, but it held us at the disadvantage because we hid nothing from you. I'd like to see what you really look like."

"To be honest, I had no idea who I'd be meeting. When I'm out and about, I tend to hide it because those who can see it and are not accustomed to the sight tend to be disturbed by it." As Rey spoke she watched Aurra's reaction when she released the tight hold she had on her Mask and let it fade. Two of the little wisps chasing around her flung themselves at the witch, circling around her like wolves sniffing out potential prey.

Aurra sat very still, her face a calm mask as she forced herself to absorb the sight of Rey's disturbing mien. Rey thought that Aurra must know but few changelings to compare her mien with, perhaps only Mizuko's and Ishtar's. Ishtar's mien was overwhelming in its primal and reality-warping power, but Mizuko's was a little more typical of changelings. Where Mizuko's mien delivered the impression an alluring, perhaps even frightening beauty, the sense of foreboding felt more like anticipation; a lure to the lustful and the unwary. Not so with Rey. Her mien combined elements Aurra had never seen before; dangerous thorns wrapped around earthy, wood-like flesh gave Rey a sculpted and unnaturally animated appearance. Rey's eyes seemed too large and they glowed with mysterious power. The wisps, as fragile as they seemed, nonetheless gave Aurra the impression they were hunting her.

Aurra suppressed a shiver and said, "Thank you for trusting me, Rey. Your hair... is so white."

"It is, isn't it." Rey's lips curved into a little smile. "Shall I hide it all away again?" she asked solicitously. "As I said, I'm really not out to make anyone uncomfortable tonight."

Aurra shook her head. "No, it's all right. Although I've never seen anyone like you, you aren't the first supernatural being I've ever set eyes on. It's who you are and I wouldn't ask you to hide yourself. It has also proven that you really are who and what you say you are. Your secrets are safe with my sister witches and with me because we are sworn never to reveal your nature or any of your secrets to any outsider." Rey got the impression that if she did, her 'goddess' would be angry and Aurra definitely did not want that.

Rey was relieved the Spring Queen wasn't so cracked that she'd forgotten the importance of secrecy for their kind. Which led to what Rey considered a natural question. "How did you come to follow Ishtar, if you don't mind telling me."

"I wouldn't mind, but we agreed as a coven not to reveal our inner secrets to those not part of the group." Aurra smiled a little. "At least not without a consensus in favor of doing so. Marie's rules, not mine."

"I understand," Rey replied, thinking about how much effort Marie had gone through to establish Rey was a witch. Could there be something more behind that than simply trying to find a piece of common ground between them? Another thought came back to the changeling, and she decided to pursue it. "You asked me what I thought of Marie's friends. What do you think of Marie's sister and her friend?"

Aurra searched for the word. "You are... intriguing. I haven't really decided what to make of you yet. You fall outside the realm of any prior experience I've had, and probably any other member of the coven as well."

"I hope you mean intriguing in a good way," Rey commented with a grin.

"I think so, so far." Aurra picked up her drink again. "I was watching your friend and I have to say that while I really don't know much of anything about you, being once human and now fae, but everything I've ever read about fae made your friend's response to invitation... well, predictable. But you didn't take your sister up on her little whim. You remain loyal to a boyfriend. *That's* intriguing. It says you might appear very... different, but you have some traits one normally ascribes to humans. Not that all human beings behave in a certain way — this club is proof that infidelity can be expected and even welcome in some relationships. But most relationships do not welcome that and you seem to be part of one." Clearly, it seemed very fae-like to Aurra for a fae being to flit from encounter to encounter, relationship to relationship and very human to stay with only one significant other.

"I hope you're not relying on Grimm's fairy tales, or the Big Book of Little People for your information." Rey swirled the ice around in her glass. "Even so-called grimoirs are wrong 99% of the time. That's why the world needs people like me. I am the Witch of the Bitter Wind and a Sage, knowledgeable in the occult and other dark secrets." She tried not to laugh, for as ridiculous as it sounded, it was true.

Aurra asked, "That sounds like quite a title. What does it really mean? Are you charged with teaching others the truth about the fae?"

"Oh, no." Rey shook her head. "Those are not my duties. Being the Witch and a Sage are two different things. Sages are a group dedicated to learning about the supernatural that's not fae. As the Witch of the Bitter Wind, I act as a consultant and counselor to other fae who seek information about or assistance with all manner of the occult. In some ways, I am a bit like Marie, leading my people in certain rituals and rites." A little grin danced across Rey's lips. "It also means some people are terrified of me and will only come to me in the most dire of circumstances. Though I am curious about what the truth about the fae is."

Aurra laughed briefly. "Ha. You'd have to tell me. After all, you are the one who said the fairy tales were wrong. In what way? And, I mean no offense, but I don't understand why do you say the world needs people like you if you aren't going to help them understand. At least those few in the world who need to understand."

"No offense taken," Rey replied easily. "It's not my job to illuminate the world about the supernatural. That would result in witch hunts, and more people like Travis McCoy?, the psycho who was kidnapping and murdering witches in Mythic last year. If people have questions or more likely problems with the supernatural, they come to me for help. Or at least my people do." She shrugged. "Most supernaturals stick with their own kind. It's difficult to trust outsiders."

"What about people like who you used to be, who your sister is now. People like me?"

"Are you talking about trust?"

Aurra shook her head. She'd been sitting and listening to Rey, Mizuko, and everyone else all night and she had absorbed a lot of information. But there were huge holes in her understanding and she knew it. "No. I'm having trouble understanding what you are trying to tell me," Aurra said. "You say the fairy tales are wrong and that it's your job to correct that. But it seems to me that the only ones who have it wrong are the ones who most need to have it right — human beings like your sister and I. I mean, if you had known years ago what you know now, would you have had to go through... whatever it was that made you become what you are now? What if your sister makes the same mistakes you did? Or the rest of us make a mistake and your sister suffers the same fate? Do you think we'll be as lucky as you to survive and return?"

"Ah. I misspoke. I apologize," Rey said. "It's not my job to correct what people know about fairy tales. I just wanted you to know that just because Mizuko looks like a nymph does not necessarily mean she'll have sex with anyone who offers. And there are brownies who would just as soon kill you as fix your shoes. If one of the beings who rule in that other world want you, there's *nothing* you could do to stop it. They're like the old gods, and can snatch away anyone at their whim." Rey wasn't trying to be cruel or to frighten Aurra, just telling her the facts. "But my people take what has happened to us very seriously, and we do whatever it takes to prevent it from happening to anyone else."

Aurra listened carefully, then said, "I get your point about your friend. I didn't mean to imply she was a slut or anything and I'm sorry if I came off that way. It was just my perception that she does whatever she decides she is interested in at the moment. Whimsical, not... gullible."

Aurra returned to the line of thought she'd intended. "I take it the survival rate for those these beings take is low?"

"Yes," Rey replied simply.

Aurra spoke slowly and with her voice lowered. Her cautious tone warned she was about to ask a very sensitive question. "Are those who survive, you and others like you, really the same person that was taken? How do you really know the illusion that protects you, this mask, isn't all that's left of the human being that your friends once knew? Are you *really* Rey Lafitte? Or might you be just a fae spirit created by the beings you speak of and infused with some memories that belonged to someone else?"

"We don't," Rey replied just as softly, "but without that belief, without the faith we haven't lost everything that made us human, we would fall into madness and become no better than those who stole us away." Aurra had voiced perhaps one of the few common fears all Changelings had. Was this all just a cruel trick by their Keepers, were all their memories of their lives before nothing more than false dreams. Rey had to believe she really was Rey Lafitte, because she refused to entertain the thought of what she might be if she wasn't.

Aurra watched Rey's face a moment. "Maybe the fact that you can have faith and hope is enough, because that's human, too. I'm sorry I have to ask questions like this. I've been deceived before, and I know that there is a lot more going on around us in this world than I see. Not that I can't see if I look, but I don't *want* to see because if I do, then the monsters will see me, too. At least now, since Ishtar came to us, we have someone who will protect us when the corrupt and the monstrous come looking for us again, as they always do."

Rey nodded and glanced at her watch as she took a sip of her water. It was getting late. "Take some comfort too in knowing there are people out there who hunt the hunters." She set her cup down. "I've enjoyed my time here tonight, and our talk, but I'm afraid I have to go. I need to be at work early tomorrow, and it's going to be a very long day."

Aurra stood up to walk her out. "I'm glad we talked. I hope I didn't annoy you too much with my questions. Would you like me to relay any message to your friend?"

"Just tell her I had to head home and I'll give her a call on Saturday."

With plenty to think about, Rey left Blood Tears behind.

Mizuko After Drinking Truth

Marie and Carson had left the Arabian Nights theme room after Mizuko assured them she was coming along after she took a moment to get herself together. Marie had kissed her cheek and told her she'd love to do this again some time. Carson was his usual polite self as well.

It was true Mizuko wanted to get herself together, but she hadn't let on what she'd really felt about it after they'd finished. At least, she didn't think she had. She wouldn't look at Carson when he'd left, and so she wasn't sure if he noticed something was wrong.

She was fairly certain that what she was feeling was guilt. It was unfamiliar and it made her stomach churn. She felt too warm and she kept wondering what Remy would say. Yet, it had felt wonderful. The worst thing was that she wasn't entirely certain she wouldn't do it again at some point. Right now, however, she just felt miserable about it.

Carson had told her that they were in no way laying claim to her. Mizuko didn't know what that meant. Did that mean that Remy had laid claim to her? She'd told her Queen she didn't belong to Remy. Had she lied somehow?

Mizuko put her face in her hands and tried to get a grip on her warring emotions. Finally, she took a deep breath, made herself get up off the bed and go to the door. There, she stopped and stared at it. She didn't think that walking out through the whole club would do anything but make her feel worse right now. She felt like she couldn't face anyone she knew right now, so she turned the knob to display the Occupied sign and went back to the bed to sit.

She found the phone Remy had given her and called him.

"Good evening, *ma petite*." He'd answered after the fourth ring.

"I'm sorry," she told him. It felt a little better to say that. "I didn't mean to do something that might upset you."

"And what is it you have done?"

"Maybe it doesn't matter," Mizuko said. "I'm not sure it does. It depends on what I am to you." It dawned on her that she hoped she was important to him, because as tangled as her emotions were right now, if she wasn't that important then she would be feeling very foolish for getting so worked up over this. "If I let someone else... touch me, would it upset you?"

"It would depend on who it was," Remy said, his voice calm but deliberate, "what they did, and whether it was welcome or not."

Mizuko was troubled by that. "So if you knew who it was and that I didn't mind at the time, you wouldn't care?"

"Of course I would care." Mizuko got the impression Remy was surprised by the question. "The question is, how angry I might be and how easy forgiveness may come."

"I've thought about you being with other women. It must be so, for how else could you acquire the blood

you need? I'm unable to provide what you need, or maybe what I provide is too dangerous." Remy could hear a little sadness in her voice at that. "But it's a necessity for you and I accepted it soon after I understood who it was I was seeing.

"I didn't realize it until now, but it's not the same for me. Yes, I need to feed, too. It's not the same as you. I can use emotions, but I don't have to. I can simply get what I need by going to my home and eating certain things that grow there. And there is now another, better way. The promise we made all together on Wednesday with you and your friends. That sustains me as well. The touch, the kiss... I didn't tell you what it meant to me. It isn't just a symbol of our promise. It's that and more. It generates the magic I need. In a very real sense, that promise can now sustain me. I won't have to go away or feed on the fear, lust, rage, or sorrow of mortals to survive.

"So it is different for me than it is for you. I don't need... to be intimate to sustain myself. So I think now what I did was wrong. I'm sorry."

"I think this conversation is better held in person, *ma petite*. Tell me where you are and I will be there shortly."

"Do you remember when we last had sex? I'm in that room." As an afterthought, she added, "It's ladies night."

There was a slight pause. "How did you end up there? I wasn't aware you had a membership to the club."

"I took a cab," she stated. "Rey called me to ask if I'd like to meet Marie and some of her friends. Marie's friends were here. They seem nice. Later, Carson called. Marie was in the mood and... one thing led to another. "

"Yes, this conversation would most definitely be better completed in person. Meet me down at the bar. I'll be there in about half an hour."

"Okay." Mizuko hung up, then got off the bed and headed downstairs.

Aurra spotted her on the way and let her know that Rey had already gone home. She thanked the witch and found a spot at the bar where she could ignore most of what was going on in the room. Carson joined her at the bar when she was served her second mixed drink of the evening — another Sex on the Deck.

"Is everything okay?" he asked.

"Yes," Mizuko said, then changed her mind. "*No. I don't know. I think I got carried away tonight. I'm going to talk to Remy about it.*"

"Carried way with what?"

"*Sex. I didn't consider enough how Remy might feel about it. I feel weird. My stomach is queasy and I'm nervous he'll be angry. I think it might be guilt. I don't like it.*"

"Very few people like feeling guilt," Carson replied. "Your wanting to talk to Remy would certainly explain the phone call I just got."

Mizuko slouched a little. It was an atypical reaction from her. "*Did I cause trouble for you?*"

"I don't think so. He knew I was going to be here tonight, and asked if I'd keep an eye out for you. Keep you company if you wanted some while you waited for him to arrive."

She stole a look at his lean, nude form and suppressed an urge to jump on his lap. Which of course made her feel guilty again. Angry with herself, she averted her eyes and forced herself to stare at her drink. Actually drinking the stuff, she was discovering, was doing nothing good for her self control. She didn't answer Carson.

Carson carefully took the glass out of Mizuko's hand and set it back down on the bar. "You're not going to do yourself any favors if you're drunk when Remy gets here." His voice was gentle and without reprimand.

She wanted to protest that it tasted good, but realized her impulses might have caused enough trouble for one night. She glared at him, then looked away and sighed.

She did have one burning question for him, though. "Carson."

"Yes?"

"I don't understand what you meant when you said you and Marie weren't trying to lay claim to me. Were you implying I'm already claimed by someone? And what does this "claim" business mean?" she demanded to know.

"Ah, that." Carson gave her a little smile. "You've been claimed by Remy. Not like a possession, but under his personal protection. A person he considers important and cares about. It means that if someone tries to take you from him, they will have to deal with him first. Earlier, I wanted to make sure you understood I didn't expect anything from you, that what I did was not intended to lure you away and get you on my side."

Mizuko looked at him and attempted to ignore everything below the neck. Then she picked up his hand in both of hers and leaned against his shoulder. She gazed across the bar and considered what he'd told her. "Oh," she said. *"I'm glad you didn't want to try to take advantage of me."*

"Would you be terribly disappointed to know that I did want to, but didn't?" Carson asked with a grin. "I'd be a fool to say I don't find you attractive, but I am Remy's friend and I'd never do that. Besides, he'd beat my ass seven ways to hell and back if I tried."

"I won't pretend that I don't enjoy contact of... almost any kind. But even aside from that, you should know how much all of you mean to me. My life is better from knowing you. In fact, my life would have been ended by now had you all not stood together both for each other and for me Wednesday. For this, for what you did for Rey, and for being my friend I would do a-- I would do a lot for you if only you asked." In this, Mizuko spoke of not just Carson but for every member of his coterie that had taken the pledge. *"But for Remy, I would do even more."*

"Why?" Carson wasn't all that old as vampires went - a veritable infant - but he'd been one long enough to have started to lose the basic ties to humanity as all his kind did.

"When one of my kind disconnects from this world, when we stop being human entirely, madness consumes us. When Remy met me, I had disconnected. I was trying not to, but I know that even my own small circle of friends — what you might call a coterie — were concerned I was, or had gone mad. Especially after this summer when I found a killer had cut open the skulls of my three of my four closest friends and dissected their brains while they still lived. I saw that and I remember nothing else. Apparently I went mad and slaughtered him and most of his hired mercenaries. I do not remember doing it. This is not good for one's mind, Carson."

"But that is not the hardest thing for someone like me. The hardest thing was when I had to change my life. My Queen ordered me to give up my home, give up living in a pond with my pet otter and make my own way in this world. So I did. But our sanity hinges upon our place in the world. Mine was gone. I had to find a new place to call home. As long as I could not do that, I would be ... lost."

Mizuko turned back to Carson to look him in the eye. *"How might you feel if you were me, going mad and numb and you knew it, but yet could do nothing to stop it? And then what if someone comes along who, no matter how different they really are, makes you feel like a woman for the first time and by doing so, chases away all your demons? How might that make you feel, and what might you do for that man? Answer that and you have the answer to your question."*

Carson was silent as he considered what she'd said. "I couldn't help but wonder, though, if I was replacing one form of madness for another. If my feelings were real or not." His words were spoken softly, though with feeling.

Mizuko sighed. *"Which means I'd like my drink back now, please."*

"I'm not stopping you," Carson said, "but sometimes you need to decide what's more important. Indulging in your vices, or dealing with what's to come with a clear head."

"I have much more experience in either hiding from the world or simply doing what people ask of me. You are being irritatingly logical." But she didn't reach for the drink. The bartender happened by and asked if she was done with it. Mizuko nodded then asked her for a glass of water.

A woman wearing a Blood Tears Staff shirt walked up to Carson and Mizuko. After giving him a thorough looking over, she handed a note to Mizuko. "From a gentleman outside."

She read then note then hopped off the barstool. She crooked her finger at him in request to come with her, then she shrugged into her coat and headed for the door.

"Will you give me a minute to get dressed? It's rather cold outside."

She stopped and smiled, then nodded.

In what seemed like hardly any time at all, Carson was dressed and escorting her out of the building on his arm. Remy stood next to his dark sedan and when he saw her an appreciative smile covered his face. When she was close, he stepped forward and kissed her on both cheeks and then on her lips in greeting.

She threw her arms around his neck to draw out the kiss. She held on, drawing out the moment, just to be sure he was really there. When she finally drew away, she signed to him. "I must be a real pain to have to deal with sometimes."

"You by far make up for it in other ways." Remy's smile didn't leave his face. "Come. Let's go somewhere warmer and more comfortable than this sidewalk."

She wanted to slip her hand in his, but she knew he didn't like too much public display, greeting kisses aside. She settled for looping her arm in his and thinking about what she needed to say to him while he led the way. They didn't walk far, just the distance to the car. He opened the rear door for her and handed her in. Once she was settled, he climbed in next to her and Carson slid behind the wheel.

Carson started up the car and said "William's?" he asked as they pulled away from the curb.

"The back entrance," Remy replied. He settled back into his seat and turned to look at Mizuko. She gazed back at him, searching his eyes and wondering what he was thinking right now, how angry he might really be.

"Tell me what happened."

"I behaved very much unlike a lady," she told him honestly. Then, embarrassed to say some things in front of Carson, she switched to sign. "I was invited to join them and I hesitated, but finally went with to watch. I kept thinking about our last time there and I let myself get worked up over it. I ended up joining them at the end. They saw I was worked up and... I think Marie likes both men and women. Sorry. That's beside the point. How angry are you with me?"

"You said you joined them," Remy signed. "Who was the other person?"

Mizuko pointed at the back of Carson's seat. "But he didn't use his cigar." She paused, then added, "Sorry, I never learned the sign for a man's part."

"Man's..." Understanding dawned. "Then what, exactly, did he use?"

She touched to fingers of one hand to her lips to indicate what he used. She blushed a little.

Remy said nothing, and turned away to look out the front of the car.

Mizuko felt miserable, but she only blamed herself. Now she knew he was really angry with her and she mentally scolded herself for being so stupid and careless. She stared at her hands.

"I know what you're thinking," Carson said into the silence, looking at Remy in the rear view mirror. "She is yours, Remy, and you know I would never do that. Hands and mouth." He spoke without any embarrassment. "No teeth, no penetration. I took no pleasure in her but gave her ease."

Mizuko tried to disappear in her seat, but alas she did not have that ability.

Remy remained silent with his thoughts. He was surprised to find he was not pleased to hear what happened between Mizuko and Carson, but the fact it was Carson was a tremendous moderating factor. The coterie was too strongly bound to each other to worry about infighting or backstabbing. He looked over at Mizuko and took note of her behavior and emotional state.

"Why do you feel guilty?" he asked, wanting to know what was going on in her head.

She didn't look at him, but signed. "I've only done things like that with you. You might have enjoyed knowing that but what I did takes that away. I think it upsets you, which tells me it matters to you. You care. You never said so, but I should have seen it sooner, for why else would you have put yourself, your resources, and your friends at risk for me time and again? I realize that I have not been as great an asset in your life as you have been in mine. I know you well enough to know that you wouldn't have allowed this imbalance unless I mattered to you.

"I hadn't thought about it until tonight. I didn't think about my own feelings either. Not until I realized I did something to put this, whatever this is between us, at risk."

"Look at me, Mizuko."

She turned her face toward him.

"If faced with the same situation, would you do it again?"

"I can't answer that because it's an absolute," she signed. "Do I want to now? No. Would I? Under certain circumstances, yes I would. Such as if you can't confirm what I think this is. Or if you can't tell me I'm important to you, what I mean to you. I don't think much would change if you can't tell me these things, except that I think I would be sad, and soon would not feel guilt should I see others."

Remy paused for a moment, and with his face carefully neutral, signed "I do not need to have sex to feed, though it makes it by far more pleasurable an act. However, I have not had sexual intercourse with any other woman since I met you." He watched her reaction, his face a cool mask.

To Mizuko, the sudden lightness in her heart was inexplicable. Her face brightened, but she was cautious. She chose Carson's method of using very broad, difficult to answer questions. "Why?"

"Because I haven't wanted to," was his simple signed reply.

"Are you saying that it's because it's your personal rule and that it has nothing to do with me?"

"It is a choice," Remy replied aloud. "Take it as you will."

"*Then are you unable to tell me whether I'm important to you?*" A chill began to settle into her tone as she spoke. "*Unable to say what I mean to you, if anything?*"

"Stop the car, Carson." Fury flared in his eyes, though his voice was tight and controlled. "After everything I have done. Protecting and caring for you. Protecting your friends and ensuring their safety when I would normally have left them to their fate. Helping save the Paladin of Shadows life because he is loved by your friend even though given the chance he would likely try to kill me. If you cannot understand what that means, what that tells you about how important you are to me, then you have my leave to fuck anyone or anything you choose."

"Take her home, Carson." The car door closed behind him in a very final sounding slam and he walked away.

Mizuko looked at Carson's face through the rearview mirror. Her face was at first disturbed, then she calmed. "*I just needed to hear him say it,*" she murmured. "*And he did. He said he cared for me. You heard him?*"

Carson nodded. "I've never seen any other woman make him that angry."

Her eyes narrowed in impish amusement, although it quickly faded away. "*At least it is a reaction.*"

She pressed the window down button on the door and opened it a crack. "*Please extend to him my apologies for testing his temper.*" She reached past the seat to touch his shoulder. "*And tell him I will be true to him.*"

She sat back in her seat. "*Taking me home is unnecessary. I will shed this form for a while. It is too clogged with emotions. Goodnight, Carson.*"

With a sigh of wind, Mizuko disappeared. A breeze swept a few stray leaves out her window and she was gone.