

February 11, 2012

Dana Mortensen, the sharp-nosed manager of Glasshouse was a personable, competent woman who always tried her best to look out for the interests of the club. Simon had left running the club in her hands even before he left for the East Coast, and after his investors hadn't attempted to change how things were done. The club was successful and there were no complaints. Dana intended to keep it that way.

Over the past few months, Dana had seen Ms. Annabeth Milogie. A patron of club and a business women, Dana first met her as someone who had been interested in purchasing the club from Simon in the early fall. Although the business deal hadn't panned out, Ms. Milogie had remained in touch at least with Dana. They talked from time to time. Dana found herself liking the woman enough to do the occasional favor for Ms. Milogie's friends. A quiet party room wasn't hard to reserve and on the very rare occasion things seemed to get a little over-excited, a quick call to Ms. Milogie brought someone over to resolve the matter quickly and quietly. Milogie and her friends paid very well for her service, making them VIP clients for Glasshouse. Dana was willing to overlook minor indiscretions.

As a side project, Dana had been checking into who the owners really were. Glasshouse was owned by a private corporation, so it wasn't easy. She didn't want to be fired for sticking her nose where it didn't belong, so she was discrete and had taken her time. After months of work, however, she came up with a short list of names. Most of them didn't mean anything to her and when she tried to look them up, found only dead ends. But two names did pan out. One was Juliani Merde, who was a known, wealthy investor. But the name with controlling interest was a surprise to her. Cassandra MacArthur? was someone who had more than a little web presence. It turned out she'd been an interior decorator, strip dancer, and a model. She certainly didn't seem to be a businesswoman.

This was a data point Dana was certain Annabeth Milogie might find interesting. She might like to make a new offer for the club since. Whether MacArthur? was interested or not, she was sure that Milogie would appreciate the heads up.

Dana made the call to Milogie's personal assistant and included an email address she'd found that was associated with Cassandra MacArthur?.

Annabeth thought about the situation carefully. Cassandra MacArthur? was an unknown factor. Annabeth's own investigations led her to determine MacArthur? could very well have had the money to invest in Glasshouse, but the question was why. Did MacArthur? have more than a monetary stake in the business. In the end, Annabeth decided it wouldn't hurt to send out feelers and make an offer. Perhaps MacArthur? would be a better businessman than Simon Bell.

The reply to her message came promptly. Ms. MacArthur? was willing to meet and talk. A few more emails were exchanged, setting up the meeting at one of Annabeth's offices in Mythic.

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January 15th, 2012

Cassandra MacArthur? breezed into Annabeth's office almost before the secretary finished announcing she was here over the office intercom. What Annabeth expected to see was an attractive woman, a model, and perhaps her agent or someone capable of helping her make business decisions. What Annabeth got was something far different.

The woman who walked in was not tall, but she wore high heels that appeared to be made of bone and leather. Her long, shapely legs were only partly concealed by a sheath dress, slitted up one side that was nearly as translucent as a wet, white tee shirt. It bore lacy whorls of spiraling patterns that covered enough

for modesty and taste. It was sleeveless, revealing more of red skin to Annabeth's ensorceled eyes. She wore gold and silver jewelry around her neck and shoulders as if they were a badge of office or mark of rank. Her hair seemed much darker than pictures Annabeth had seen as well, thick and almost the consistency of vines. The elongated ears reminded Annabeth of Mizuko, but the piercing, vivid green eyes seemed to take in the room with a single, knowing look. A wreath of twisted, leafy vines that gave off an eerie green light hovered impossibly over Cassandra's head.

At the same as she took all this in, Annabeth was hit by a nearly overpowering sense of sensuality. As she watched Cassandra move into the room, she couldn't help but marvel at the perfect grace of motion. It produced an unaccountable desire to see Cassandra move more.

Something moved to her right and Annabeth risked a glimpse at her office windows. The soft light produced dim but recognizable reflections of both of them. Except when Cassandra stopped a few feet in front of Annabeth's desk, her reflection strode around it and as she watch, raised a hand to caress Annabeth's face, kiss her cheek and then looked straight back at Annabeth with a devious look in her eyes.

Annabeth pulled her gaze away from the window and put it back on the woman in front of her. Her mind was reeling, but she made an effort to get her thoughts back under control. She stood, taking care to keep her eyes on her guest's face, and extended her hand. "It's a pleasure to meet you, Ms. MacArthur. Thank you agreeing to meet with me."

Cassandra took her hand in a firm grasp. A small smile flickered on her lips. The Queen of Spring held Annabeth's hand a little longer than necessary. "The pleasure is mine, I'm sure." She allowed her gaze wander, then drifted toward the bookcase. It was filled with the usual assortments of books one would find in an office, interspersed with some of the awards she'd won from various business associations.

"Please," Annabeth said, "have a seat." She picked up the two spiralbound reports in front of her and moved to sit in one of the chairs on the other side of the desk.

Cassandra took the chair next to Annabeth and sat. She put her elbow on the arm of the chair, propped her chin on her hand, and then said, "I hope you don't bite. Much."

Annabeth watched Cassandra's face for a moment before replying "Only when needed, or if asked very nicely." Did this woman somehow know what she was, Annabeth thought, or was she being hit on? Or perhaps both?

Cass was very close to Annabeth from this position and she took advantage of that to look into Annabeth's eyes. Cass took a breath. "You know. I told Simon the first time I walked into Glasshouse many of you had an interest in the club. I think he spent more time thinking of ways to try to get me into his bed than listening to me."

Ah, so she does know, Annabeth thought. "He was crude and verging on insulting during our meeting, more interested in playing games than looking after your investment."

Cassandra frowned. "Was he? I don't think I like that. Well, I don't think you'll have to deal with him again. He's out East somewhere, pursuing some personal goals I believe. I'm not very good with investments, myself. Although rude to you, Simon did very well with my money so I would hesitate to change it. But I would still like to hear what you have to say."

"If I may be so bold," Annabeth said, "he more or less told me he had nothing to do with the day to day running of the club, that he left it all to his managers. He treated the club more as his playground than a place of business. Regardless, here is a copy of my offer, the same one I made to Simon." She went on to explain the contents, avoiding lawyerspeak and using common terms. "I'm looking to buy into Glasshouse, help run it and make it as successful as it can be. The amount of cash I am offering is high, but the potential

for making even more money is there, and the club will need that cash to go ahead with some of the promotions I'd like to do.

"In addition, though it is not something I would ever put into a document like this, having an equity stake in the club will make it easier for me to make sure my people behave themselves appropriately."

"Please. Tell me more about that." Cassandra smiled and touched Annabeth's hand as if in reassurance, but realized it was too personal and took her hand away. "I'm not naive. I know what happens in these clubs, that they are ideal hunting grounds for people not only with your interests, but others as well. It is a fact of life. I think that Simon tended to forget that, but I assure you that I don't."

"If I have an ownership claim to the club it would make getting it declared as my territory," Annabeth said. "If it is my territory, then I make the rules about behavior and can enforce them. I have already been dealing with situations that have started to get out of control, but it's tricky given the... unclaimed aspect of the club."

Cassandra nodded. "Why not then simply offer to buy the entire club? Why offer to buy in as a partner with someone you don't know?"

"Two reasons. I don't want to own another club outright right now," Annabeth replied honestly. "And I didn't think I'd be able to convince everyone to sell."

"Fair enough." Cassandra looked at the papers with the offer. "Thirty percent, and you book the entertainment? I have no problems with that, but if you don't mind, I'd like to have one of my people take a look." Before she set it aside, she looked at the last page. She blinked and then looked at Annabeth, but she didn't make a remark about the high figure. Instead, she asked, "Will you explain to me a little about this territory concept? Where I'm from, that meant one thing but I'm not sure it's what you mean."

"It means I set the rules and can enforce them as I see fit. I decide who can visit and who's not allowed, and what goes on. I couldn't prevent any or all of my kind from pursuing our varied interests there, but I can take steps needed to ensure everyone's safety as best I can."

"What about other kinds? Do you mean you would take steps to police them, too?"

"It was not my intention to do so," Annabeth replied. "I do not think they would appreciate someone not of their kind trying to tell them what to do."

Cassandra considered. "I could see some of my people visiting the club from time to time. That might lead to interesting situations between yours and mine. But I suppose that is even more likely to happen if you weren't on board with us than if you were." She smiled warmly. "I know that I certainly have enjoyed many such... situations in the past with no harm come of it."

Annabeth couldn't help but return the smile. Another movement out of the corner of her eye caught her attention and she glanced at the windows. Annabeth's reflection was there, though as was typical it was difficult to make out her own face. Cassandra's reflection was lying in a sultry position on her side across the top of the desk twirling Annabeth's favorite pen in her fingers. Yet, when she looked at the real Cassandra, she was still sitting in the chair next to her.

"I believe in hoping for the best and preparing for the worst." Annabeth pondered whether or not she really should ask what was going on with Ms. MacArthur's reflection, if it would be wiser to keep her ability to see her as she was a secret. She decided on discretion. "If I may, why did you decide to invest in the club?"

"It wasn't my decision," Cassandra stated. "I had made an arrangement with Bell to take care of my finances as I have an unfortunate habit of spending or giving away money about as fast as I earn it otherwise. Realizing my own shortcoming in that area, but wanting to be able to help those who come to me or need

my assistance, I wanted to grow my resources. So, I instead funneled my income toward Simon Bell, as well as that of my... board I suppose you might say. He was charged with investing it and showing success within one year. He did well, I think, in that regard in a short period of time but he needed to move on. So, I'm left adrift a little. I haven't done anything with the investments he's made.

"Still, I've owned a club before as part of a partnership so what is needed is familiar to me. It was a very different sort of club than Glasshouse. It was perhaps even more attractive to certain kinds of clientele, including... your kind." Cassandra smiled wryly. "But I was a different person then."

Annabeth nodded. She'd found references to Cassandra being part-owner of the original Blood Tears. It was turned into a franchise, and one was opened in Mythic; Annabeth had a membership. "I know several financial advisors. One of them is a close friend, in fact. Now, do you have any other questions about the offer for the club?"

"The club? No," Cassandra said. "I should have an answer for you in a day or two."

"Alright." Annabeth paused. "Are there any other questions you'd like to ask?"

"Would you like to go out some time?" Cassandra wasn't sure why she'd asked. It was an impulsive thing, she supposed, but there was something about Annabeth that drew her, captured her attention. She knew Annabeth was a vampire and they could be dangerous, but she simply didn't feel threatened. Besides, she'd handled much worse than a lone vampire by herself and had no problem doing so. She was, after all, a Daughter of Ancient Ishtar, with all that implied. Her domain was lust, love, and war.

The image of Cassandra reclining on the cushions in the harem room at Blood Tears filled Annabeth's mind. "I'd like that." The words were out of her mouth before her brain had consciously formed them.

Cass picked up the little purse she'd brought with her and rummaged inside, producing a pen and a small, string-bound notebook. She wrote down a number, tore the page out and offered it to Annabeth. "Call me. I'll have an answer for you about the club in two days. I don't anticipate any issues. Maybe we'll have a new partnership to celebrate." She smiled. "I always enjoy dancing."

An hour after meeting with Cassandra MacArthur, Annabeth was still bemused by the woman, and perhaps a tiny bit confused by what was going on with the woman's reflection. She knew someone who could likely answer those questions.

"Hello?" Mizuko's voice sounded as normal as any person's voice might over the phone.

"Good evening, Mizuko. It's Annabeth. Are you busy right now?"

"No. I was just soaking in the tub." Thinking Annabeth was making small talk, she tried returning it. "What are you doing right now?"

Annabeth paused for a moment. "I'm sitting at my desk. Could we meet to talk in about half an hour? I've got something I'd like to talk to you about, and I don't want to do it over the phone."

"Yes," Mizuko replied. "Where would you like to meet?"

"How about your apartment?"

"Okay." Mizuko then added, "You are always welcome to stop by."

Half an hour later, the front desk buzzed up that a Ms. Milogje was there. Mizuko thanked them and asked the gentleman to please let her in. When Annabeth arrived a few minutes later at the apartment, she found the door open and Mizuko waiting within, sitting casually on the arm of a couch.

"I appreciate your seeing me on such short notice, Mizuko," Annabeth said, closing the door behind her.

"*It is no trouble,*" Mizuko said. "*Is there something on your mind?*"

"Earlier today I had a business meeting with a woman by the name of Cassandra MacArthur," Annabeth said as she walked into the livingroom area and placed a friendly kiss on Mizuko's cheek. "Can you tell me anything about her?"

"*Did she appear as anything other than human to you?*" Mizuko asked.

"She appeared very... fae."

Mizuko nodded. "*Then I presume you noticed the wreath of thorns over her head?*"

"Yes, I did."

"*What that means is not only is she fae, she is a queen. Her time to rule our people comes with the arrival of spring. I have spoken with her only in official capacity on behalf of my own queen, and then only in matters I can't discuss. But I have heard a few rumors and I do know some things she has accomplished over the past year. Would you like to hear both rumor and fact, or fact alone?*"

"I'd like to hear all of it," Annabeth replied.

"*It is fact that prior to her arrival a few years ago, there was no regent of her court. She is of the Court of Spring, Court of Desire. After she arrived, however, the natural forces of spring immediately recognized her as the greatest power and potential for this court and her Crown appeared. As a result, the King of Summer and the Queen of Autumn, my queen, were forced to either accept her as an equal or destroy her before she could take her throne. Summer chose to support her in hopes she would ally with him against Autumn. This she did, feigning weakness and a desire for his support to protect her people.*

"*But a year later, the war with a powerful being by the name of Oberon, a Lord of Arcadia, tried to claim her as his new consort. My people, collectively known as the Desert Duchy went to war. Many of us died at the hands of the Oberon or his goblins. The war concluded only last fall, around the time I met Remy, when my friends and I launched an attack on a new breeding ground for his forces. It was a trap, of course, a distraction. Oberon personally attacked our stronghold within the Otherworld with a small personal guard, slaughtering everyone he came across. When my friends and I returned with our forces, the King of Summer had already been engaged by Oberon and defeated, my own Queen beaten and one of her sisters murdered. Then the Queen of Spring finally entered.*

"*Her weakness and innocence were a mere ruse, Annabeth. She'd deceived us all into thinking she could barely hold her throne, much less challenge a Fae Lord. That day she revealed her true power, and did battle directly with Oberon. I was there and I saw with my own eyes. She shattered his breastplate and drove him away. He was never able to so much as touch her, but she hurt him. I don't think Oberon can be killed, but she hurt him enough it brought an end to the war.*"

Mizuko folded her arms. "*The Queen of Spring is very adept at hiding her true strength. There is a rumor that she has wrested a Contract from an Old God and that she now wields this power as her own. The evidence is in her mien, which you saw in the form of the Sumerian jewelry she wears. Another rumor is that she has inherited the power of an ancient called Ishtar and that she now holds the position of a goddess to scores of*

*mortal followers. Rey thinks this is a lie, another deception. I'm not so certain. She got the power to defeat Oberon from somewhere. I cannot believe any single fae being like us could ever hope to defeat a Fae Lord girded for war like Oberon was."*

Annabeth nodded, taking in everything the nymph told her. It was unexpected, this talk of war. If Rey disagreed with what others thought of the source of Cassandra's power, perhaps it would be worthwhile to spend some time talking with her. But there were other questions that were a bit more pressing. "You said she was the queen of the Court of Desire. What does that mean? Can she control other people through it, manipulate them?"

*"Well yes, but all of us can do that to one extent or another. Don't worry, I'm very bad at it. Rather... stunted in that area to be honest. My powers lie toward elemental forces. That makes me a good Legate — people know I'm not going to lie or manipulate them into agreeing with me. But you asked about the Court of Desire. Well, it is called that because desire is the emotion they have greatest affinity to. You see, we can gain power from emotions. Again, I'm bad at it — I'm more a creature of the Otherworld, thus I am dependent as much upon faerie foods as your kind are upon blood. Maybe. I guess I don't know really how much you depend on that.*

*"Your question is really, 'will she manipulate me through emotional control', right? If you mean by using powers on you, I don't think so, unless she thinks you are mortal. If she knows better, then I doubt she would because being what you are, you stand a very good chance of noticing should any fae person try that."*

Part of Annabeth was relieved to hear that, but the predator in her wouldn't quite buy it completely. "When I was talking to her, her reflection was... not behaving as a normal reflection would. Why is that?"

Mizuko looked a little surprised. This was news to her. *"I'm not sure. I've heard that those of us who are very powerful develop certain... eccentricities? I think that's the word. A kind of weakness. Much like a Fae Lord or Lady might have. If that's true then it's like a... side effect of gaining power at the expense of a... a soul I guess. Would you say it was like her soul wasn't quite... attached? But then, if she knew you could see her, then she might have done that deliberately, a deception. I wouldn't know if the queen next to me was really her or if the real queen was actually in the mirror."* The nymph seemed really confused and greatly disturbed at the idea. What if she couldn't tell which side of the mirror was real? Mizuko shivered.

"I don't know if she knew," Annabeth replied. "I certainly didn't tell her. But you seem really upset about this. Why?"

*"Because a mirror doesn't always hold a reflection. Sometimes it is something else. A Gate. A person."* Mizuko watched intently to see if Annabeth understood what she was trying to say.

Annabeth shook her head and shrugged, indicating her confusion.

Mizuko stepped over to the black screen of TV. *"Is this reflection real?"* she asked. Suddenly the TV showed vines and brambles glistening in the night, their sharp spines sparkling in the starlight. Mizuko stuck her arm in the TV-gate, then withdrew it. The TV returned to its blackened reflective state, nothing more than a pics of modern technology. Mizuko held her arm up close to Annabeth's face. Scratches from the thorns had pierced her flesh. Rivulets of blood trickled down her arm to her elbow. *"What you saw is real,"* she said in a fierce whisper. *"Isn't it? I am not certain. I believe it is all real, reflection or not. The Queen is in the mirror, and she is here in this world."*

Mizuko's voice was shaky, a touch hysterical as she laughed.

"How did you do that?" Annabeth was concerned at Mizuko's behavior.

*"I am fae,"* Mizuko replied as if that explained it all. But she noticed Annabeth's confusion and doubt. *"Any*

*door, window, gate, or mirror of any kind can lead to my world. Anyone can open a door there if they know how. Or, if you happen to be fae, all doors may open to the Otherworld.*" The smile Mizuko gave her was disturbing. *"But doors open two ways, do they not? If they didn't, I certainly wouldn't be here. So think about this - if the Spring Queen's reflection did not reflect what she did was it really a reflection at all?"*

"I think it reflected what was on her mind," Annabeth said. "What she wanted to do."

Mizuko frowned. *"What makes you say that?"*

"Her reflection was... flirting with me and my reflection." Annabeth watched Mizuko's face carefully, and continued to try and ignore the blood running down the nymph's arm. "And when our meeting was over, she asked me out."

Mizuko looked both surprised and puzzled. *"She did. That would be unexpected,"* Mizuko agreed. *"She wasn't mean or scary or anything?"*

Annabeth shook her head. "No. She was quite polite for the most part, and friendly."

*"Will you see her again?"*

"At least once, if only to close the business deal. Why?"

*"I'm curious. So you haven't decided whether to go out with her?"*

"Oh, I will go out with her at least once, but as what, I have no idea."

*"I don't understand."*

"I mean, will we be simply going out, say, for a drink as associates, or will things end up more intimate or personal."

*"Oh. Well, if she wants to be more intimate, do you think you'd really say no? I mean... she's the Queen of Desire, after all."*

"Just because she's the queen doesn't mean I'll give in," Annabeth replied. "Just because I may be attracted to someone doesn't mean I'll have sex with them."

*"Okay. I didn't mean to upset you,"* Mizuko said. She looked at her arm, then migrated to the kitchen where she ran it under water. *"It's just that I haven't known anyone to go out with something they find desirable and not go all the way. But then again, I only know the dating habits of only one other person aside from myself."* Mizuko smiled a little sheepishly. *"So I apologize if I implied anything offensive."*

"No offense taken," the vampire replied with a smile. "Is your arm going to be okay?"

*"Yeah. Um. That was kind of dumb and also dangerous. I got carried away a little, but I just wanted you to understand."*

"Do you do that often? Get carried away like that I mean."

Mizuko suddenly felt very self-conscious. *"No. Maybe. Just when I'm alone a lot I guess."* Amber was a blessing, Mizuko felt. When her friend was around she had someone to talk to other than the little fae creatures she saw flitting around at the edge of her vision and somehow it reminded her how she was expected to act around people.

"Perhaps you might find something to do?" Annabeth suggested. "A hobby, or do volunteer work. Things that would have you spending time around people. I know several places that could certainly use some help."

Mizuko looked doubtful. *"I don't know. It's not safe. I used to hang around the homeless shelters. Made a bunch of friends, but most of them were murdered by something that was hunting me. I think I lost my mind that day."* She'd never really recovered from that, not even a little, and the way she stared at the running water while her hands shook proved it. *"I'd rather keep what I have left."*

"There are places other than homeless shelters to volunteer at," Annabeth said, "but I understand." She decided she had to have a talk with Remy, and soon.

Mizuko turned off the water and frowned at the gashes in her arm. But she remembered there was one or two pieces of fluffshroom that she'd picked in the hedge. Refrigeration, she'd found, didn't really help the longevity so she had to keep replenishing the supply. But fluffshroom was bitter and dry, and much better to eat cold than warm. She opened the refrigerator, pulled out what looked like a puffy, green mushroom cap and popped it into her mouth. She watched the gashes in her arm fade and disappear. *"All better,"* she said happily.

"Did the mushroom heal you?" Annabeth asked, hiding her wince at the obvious question she'd just asked.

*"Hm? Oh. No, not exactly. It doesn't have healing properties in itself. But my body can use it to do that. It's because I used to spend so much time in the H — in the Otherworld. Most of the fae you meet won't be able to do that. I'm weird."* Mizuko smiled. *"What I ate is called fluffshroom and to me it tastes like a sort of thick, bitter cotton candy. But Amber tells me this stuff tastes awful to her."*

"Are there things that can heal beings other than the fae in the Otherworld?"

*"In theory, I suppose so. Some Fae beings can do it, such as some of those who are members of Spring. I remember the Spring Queen went through and personally healed many people after the battle with the Goblin King. Faeries like her can heal anyone and anything with a kiss."*

"What about fruits and other things? Are there any with healing properties that would work on vampires?"

Mizuko shook her head. *"I doubt it."* Mizuko opened the fridge and pulled out another fluffshroom and offered it to Annabeth. *"But here. You can try it if you like. It isn't harmful. Amber tried it and told me it tasted awful, but that was all."*

"No thank you," Annabeth said politely with a little shake of her head. "Solid food of any type doesn't always agree with me."

*"Oh. Well, I don't think it would be much to you anyway. Now, there is magic to be had there, of course. But the problem with going there to look for such things is that the moment you take your eyes off the path back to the world, you'll be lost. Although your odds improve greatly if you are with a faerie familiar with that part of the Otherworld, such as I am near my home and also near here. Think of it kind of like dropping into the middle of the Amazon jungle two hundred years ago with no supplies and no knowledge of what is safe and what isn't. If you don't have a guide, then probably if the local fauna and flora don't kill you, the natives certainly will."*

Annabeth nodded, and admitted, "I have no real desire to go adventuring."

Mizuko nodded. *"It's terribly dangerous. That's why I go to the Goblin Markets to get such things."*

"I take it those are less dangerous than going exploring on one's own?"



"Yes. You can purchase anything there. Things. Dreams. Power. Knowledge. Even slaves."

Annabeth was quiet for a moment as she thought about what the nymph had just said. "Is it common amongst your kind? Slavery, I mean?"

"We were all slaves," Mizuko said sadly. "Kidnapped from our homes, or in my case off the street, by the Fae Lords and Ladies to serve them, be used and abused by them. They do not understand any kind of human emotion, you know. That goes double for compassion. And so it matters not one bit to them to pull off an arm, re-mold flesh like clay or-- wait. What was I saying? Oh, you asked if slavery was common among my kind. No. We hate slavery and slavers. We are all escaped slaves, you see. But the Fae Lords pay well to have their slaves back and so such things can be found at the Market, even if it is forbidden. Mortals, fae, whatever. If you want it, it can be found and purchased there. For a price."

The vampire tucked that bit of information away for later. "The price is rarely money." It was a statement more than a question.

Mizuko nodded. "The price might be anything of value, and is usually haggled over."

That didn't surprise Annabeth. Among her own kind, offering cash in payment for something could be considered tantamount to an insult. Favors and other material items were the norm.

"May I ask you some things, too?"

"Certainly," Annabeth replied, "but I may not have answers for them all."

"You and Remy and everyone need blood, yes? And you take it from mortals?"

"Yes, and sometimes from animals if we must."

"I saw how Leopold was made. What was done to him. He was hurt a lot. Shamed, and destroyed as a person, then killed. Must you do this to people often?"

"No," Annabeth replied firmly. "It does not have to be done that way at all. How did you manage to see how Leopold was made?"

"Magic," Mizuko explained. "I can see someone's worst traumas if I wish. You'll remember when - it was the night I passed out. It was a bit of a shock," Mizuko confided. Then she added, "I did it for Remy. So, you don't actually kill people? Remy doesn't kill someone every time he's thirsty?"

"It is considered... inappropriate to kill someone when feeding. It is a sign of lack of control. If we killed every time we fed, then there would be dead bodies littering the streets."

Mizuko looked puzzled. "Is it hard not to kill?"

"Sometimes, if we are very hungry, or not in complete control of ourselves," Annabeth said, "it can be very easy to drink so deeply that the mortal dies."

"When you feel passionate with someone, is it hard not to taste them? To drink too deeply?"

"It can be," Annabeth replied. "In most people, a vampire bite produces intense pleasure. Biting while having sex makes it easier to have the feelings blend in. And sex is always pleasurable, isn't it. Often, the vampire can taste that pleasure in the blood, allowing them to feel it. Continued drinking continues the pleasure in the mortal, creating a vicious circle."

*"Remy doesn't like to taste my blood. Not after the first time. Recently, he said he was concerned because it was dangerous to be together, but I don't understand what he means. I thought he was afraid I might do something to him. I would not. I don't even know that I could since I think he might be stronger than me and I know he is tougher. Then I thought he was afraid he might do something to me. But he does not... bite me like that. And anyway, if something bad were happening I can flee. Always. I don't think anything could stop me if I wanted to leave a place. So what is the danger?"*

Annabeth sat there and looked at Mizuko and wondered if Mizuko really knew what she had gotten herself into. "That's the key, isn't it. Wanting to flee. You might not know something bad was happening because the vampire could make you believe that. That you were safe and would come to no harm regardless of what was going on. Or get your mind all caught up in the pleasure of sex that you don't know which end is up. That all that mattered was that pleasure." She shook her head. "Some vampires are powerful enough to make you *want* to sacrifice yourself, give up your life for them, and you'd do it, regardless of what you may otherwise think."

*"Is that what he is afraid of? That he will do that to me?"*

"He might." Annabeth shrugged. "It is our nature to control, subdue and dominate. When we encounter a powerful being such as yourself, our first instinct is to bind it to us, to control it for our use and our use alone."

*"So... the more dangerous he thinks I could be, the more he will want to control me in some way?"*

"Or the more useful to him. But I cannot read his mind, so I cannot answer for him."

*"Do you feel it's dangerous being around me? For either you or I?"*

"I cannot say," Annabeth answered honestly. "I do not know you well enough, nor are we close enough." She didn't add that as long as Remy had a claim on Mizuko, the nymph would be protected from any attempts to control her. If that claim was ever revoked, well, things would be different.

*"This is frustrating," Mizuko said. Actually, she looked dejected and depressed more than frustrated. She leaned listlessly on the countertop. "Well, maybe I should just read him. I could know what he is afraid of if I wanted to, any time. I never have done that because I wanted him to talk to me and I respected his privacy. He doesn't have a corner on the control-the-other-person reflex, you know. I'm around those kinds of people all the time. My own people. And just because I don't understand people well enough to do it well myself, doesn't mean I'm as helpless as a mortal."*

"I doubt he feels you are helpless," Annabeth replied. "As for talking..." She shrugged. "He's a man."

Mizuko sighed. *"Well, between you and I, since we've promised to keep our secrets just between the six of us, he doesn't have to control me. I'd do anything for that man. It's hard for me to put in words, but I really feel like he saved me. I'd been ordered to be a part of this world by my Queen, but I have to admit I was failing miserably, despite the help of my friends. He came along and made me feel things again. Feeling anything was good, but he made me feel like a woman instead of a... creature. I could tell my friends and allies thought I was going mad and they are right."* She laughed once, humorlessly. *"Not all that stable as it is, am I? I scare Amber sometimes."*

*"See, Queen Veridia is really probably right. In a sense I am definitely influenced by him, but it's because of my choices, not anyone else's. Because he's so important to me. He doesn't need powers if he wants something from me. In that sense, my Queen's fears are real. But at the same time, I did only exactly what she asked of me. What everyone asked of me. How could it be wrong?"*

"Just because someone asked you to do something doesn't mean you should, or that it is the right thing to

do," Annabeth said carefully. "Forgive me for saying this, but no matter how... unstable you might be, you're acting the fool. Have you given thought about the consequences of your actions. It's one thing to care about someone, to be grateful for what they've done for you. It's another to talk as you do about Remy, about what you'd do for him. It smacks of obsession, and I think it is unworthy of you."

*"The consequences of my actions? Consequences would be lovely to see, Annabeth."* Mizuko sighed in frustration. *"But there has been nothing. If I obsess it is because I'm in no place at all here. Am I a threat to him or he to I? Does he care about me or care for me? Does he feel anything or not? He is not good at answering questions. I've spent a great deal of my time considering disobeying my Queen and returning to the Otherworld. There I have no such concerns, worries of moralities or loyalties."*

"I thought you said you weren't a coward, Mizuko." Annabeth watched the nymph's face steadily. "Everyone on the world deals with the same things, wondering if the person we care so deeply about cares for us in return. Wanting to run away and hide..." She shook her head. "But I wasn't referring to the situation with Remy, but about your Queen and your friends."

*"That's not hiding. It's giving up on hope that there is something worth fighting for between Remy and I. Choosing to not stick around for something that turns out to be illusion is not cowardice. Choosing to stay here and risk what I tried to tell you I already risked in the hope there might be something more is also not cowardice. And I don't understand what you mean about my Queen and my friends."*

"It is hiding, Mizuko. Retreating from situations that make you unhappy, going somewhere you don't have to worry about it rather than moving on is cowardice in my books. I thought you were stronger than that. I bet the Queen and your friends think you are too. What would they say if they heard you talking like this? What would they think if you disappeared back into the Otherworld because it is more emotionally "safe"? How do you think they would feel, and how would your retreat affect them? Do you not think your circle of friends are judged by your actions?"

"And don't go blaming Remy for your frustration in your relationship with him. He is a man, a man of actions, and you are two different species. You need to take off your blinders and see the big picture. Understand what you both are. I can tell you he has done more for you, a woman he neither feeds on nor controls, than he has for any other in all the years I have known him. And he has not once asked for anything big in return. If you're looking for declarations of love or explanations of feelings, I doubt you'll ever get them. If you need those words, you have to look at everything he's done and hear the words behind them. For him, actions speak louder than words. If you want to get anywhere, you'll just have to learn how to listen."

Mizuko looked back at Annabeth. *"Fine. I'm done talking about it or him. I'll learn what I need."* Mizuko's mind explored a labyrinth of possibilities, decided she clearly needed to know more about vampires and finding a course of action on how she can extract what she needs to know.

"How do you plan to do that?"

Mizuko squeezed her eyes shut and held her head until she overcame a surge of mental pain. When she did, she opened her eyes and looked at Annabeth calmly. *"I have already shown you, Remy and all of you, by my actions. It should be quite clear."*

"Not really, given I don't know all that you've done," Annabeth pointed out.

Mizuko shrugged. *"I am quite certain you will realize it before dawn."* Mizuko smiled, but not unpleasantly. *"I appreciate your candor tonight. I hope my answers for your questions prove as helpful as your answers are to mine."*