

It was the night of the motley lunch meeting.

Rey pulled into a parking space in the lot next to the club. It was supposedly a slow night - which was why she and Mizuko chosen to go - but there were few spots left. The club's name, Corazón, was blazoned across the front of the pseudo-Mission style building, the deep red of the lights looking like blood on the stucco finish. It wasn't one of the biggest clubs in Santa Fe, but it had received many good reviews online and had the reputation of not being a meat market. Exactly the kind of thing she was looking for, though Mizuko had protested half-heartedly.

Without glancing at her friend, Rey stepped out of her car, pleased with the fact she didn't topple, tumble or simply keel over with her three inch stiletto heels.

Mizuko stepped out of the passenger side and shut the door behind her. She feigned indignation and then signed to Rey once she had her friend's attention. "If this place is boring, then I vote we go to a meat market. They're underrated and maligned as being terrible places that cater to people who just want one night stands. I believe they are in fact, *excellent* places to hook up for one night stands."

She walked around the car and joined Rey. She again had reinforced her Mask to conceal her changeling nature from other changelings. She appeared even to Rey as simply a very attractive young woman with long dark hair, eyes that matched, wearing an outfit that Rey had seen before during a lunch-time meeting with the motley. Since summer was long past and it was now fall, Mizuko had thrown on a short leather jacket that covered her skimpy top. It still left her midriff above the low skirt bare and though she wasn't about to admit it, she was getting cold fast.

"Tell me, why were you wearing that outfit before?" Rey signed. "It was rather too early to be going clubbing."

"Working," Mizuko signed with a smile. "Over the past few weeks Amber and I noticed that the more attractive girls sometimes tended to attract the rougher types. I'm not sure why that is." Mizuko shrugged, then continued. "So Amber and I decided a decoy to attract them would be one way to handle it."

"I had been staying out of sight after I got yelled at for being 'competition' out front where the girls score customers. To handle this, I dressed more like someone who works in there and just hung out. I don't pretend to work or do anything like that. Just hang out. The same couple of jerks who liked to think they could mess with the girls just because they paid for time with them decided to take up their business offering with me. Pushy, rude, that sort of thing. Guys like that think they can get what they want. And I got to teach them otherwise."

"I don't do it much. I don't want to be identified as a hooker or anything. I just came out and did that here and there when the girls told me that the rougher ones might be coming around. So I had the girls that got picked on take a hike and when they got pushy with me, BAM." Mizuko slapped her fist into a hand to emulate beating someone up, then continued to sign. "I mugged them and gave the cash to the girls they'd beat up before. Everyone wins and the ruffians got a lesson for just the price of what was in their wallets."

Mizuko eyed Rey's outfit one last time. "Amber came up with the outfits, including the one I loaned you tonight. You should be able to lure someone with that getup, or you just aren't doing it right."

Rey looked down at the skirt (that wasn't much more than a handspan's width of fabric) with the thigh high stockings she now wore. "I think I'd have to work very hard not to," she said with a chuckle. The blouse she wore was actually her own, an older white dress shirt that created a very effective naughty schoolgirl outfit (and rode low enough to give everyone a tantalizing glimpse of her tattoos front and back. Like the shirt, what she wore underneath was her own, black lace and lycra, and something she really didn't mind if someone saw. "You ready to go inside and see what's on the menu?"

"I'm hungry," Mizuko signed back in agreement. "Wait, you going incognito or full fae glory there?"

Rey shrugged. "I hadn't really thought about it. I've got no idea who we might see in there."

Mizuko nodded and followed Rey inside. The interior was not what Rey'd expected. Rich dark wood was everywhere, with not so much as a hint of chrome to be seen. The floors were scarred as if trod on for generations, and the Mission-style furniture appeared just as old and lovingly cared for. Leather was the only upholstery material on the couches and chairs in the lounge. An immensely oversized fireplace, centered in the wall opposite the entrance, served as a focal point - and the center of one of three bars. A quick glance at the ceiling showed an abundance of lights, so they could make it as bright or as dim as they chose. For now, the place was half lit, like a warm sunset.

The place was probably about a third full, with a mainly young crowd, and the outfits Rey and Mizuko wore weren't the most conservative, though pretty close to being the most provocative. The dress code appeared to be very tight, very scanty, or a combination of both.

A trio of young Latinos stood over to one side watching as the two friends walked by. One of them nudged another and said something in rapidfire Spanish, making them all laugh appreciatively. Rey slid a glance back at them over her shoulder, waggled a finger at them and said "tsk, tsk. I'm the one who does the spanking."

The young men stared at her for a moment, then one who spoke turned bright red and his friends began to laugh even harder. Rey turned her back on them and kept walking, glad she'd taken the time to brush up on her Spanish.

Had she been concerned about the appeal of her appearance, that little scene would have banished any doubt. But she knew how beautiful she was, and she knew how to use it. She simply chose not to.

Mizuko had already wandered to the bar by this time and stood there listening to a tall, pale young man with dark eyes. Her eyes were fixed on his face as he spoke and she smiled and nodded. He asked her something and she looked thoughtful then looked up at him coyly. Her companion turned to the bartender and placed an order while they each took a stool and sat down.

Rey slid into the open stool on the other side of Miz and signaled the bartender that she'd like to place an order. That done, she turned slightly to look over the man who was even now chatting up her friend. He was, of course, abiding by the dress code of the evening: tight black jeans and a deep blue ribbed t-shirt. Around his left wrist he wore a wristwatch with a braided leather band the same color of the cowboy boots on his feet.

Her eyes met his briefly, and gave him a little friendly smile before she let her gaze slip away. Rey wasn't about to try and be competition for Mizuko. She turned her back to the bar to survey the club. A little chuckle escaped her as she considered the room. She could already see the interaction of the others there, who was checking out whom. No few curious and interested looks her way. It was only to be expected. Both she and Mizuko were obviously not regulars here, and, she had to admit, far more attractive than any of the women already prowling the floor.

Still, before either of them were going to get too far ahead of themselves, Rey wanted to know who - or rather what - was out there. Exercising a bit of her will, she reached out with her senses to try and identify what she could.

She discovered three supernatural presences in the club. One was on the right side of the dance floor, and something she wasn't sure she'd have found here - a werewolf. His back was to her, though the fineness of his ass seemed familiar to her. The second she spotted to her left, sitting at the far corner of the bar; a Changeling. His shoulder length hair was a riot of metallic black and matte silver. His face, though it could

be described as fine-features, was definitely male, and his skin fairly shimmered. Her eyes met his and for a moment she saw a void of aching loneliness before it was locked away behind the cool gaze of a predator at rest. Rey smiled at him with friendly curiosity before he looked away.

The bartender arrived and took her order, but stopped him before he walked away. Sliding a twenty across the bar, she said "and I'd like to pay for another drink for the gentleman at the end of the bar." The 'tender nodded at her in quickly mastered surprise. "Don't tell him it's from me," Rey asked, lightly touching the bartender's hand. "I know it sounds strange, but I just thought... he'd like a drink." The man nodded and moved off to fill the order. What was he going to do, say she understood the man's loneliness? That sounded like a really cheap pick-up line.

The third supernatural presence stood just on the other side of Mizuko. Though he looked lively enough to mortal eyes, her activated supernatural senses told her in no uncertain terms, he was a vampire.

Rey felt a flash of rage roll through her, though she closed her eyes for a moment to get it under control. Of all things to meet here. It was almost enough to ruin her growing enjoyment of the evening.

Hoping she'd mastered her emotions, she placed her hand on Mizuko's shoulder to get her attention. Once she did, she signed "Be very careful, and please, don't overreact, as it could be bad. That guy is a vampire."

Mizuko eyed her seriously for a moment, then broke into grin and covered her mouth in silent laughter. Once she had recovered, she turned and signed something to the man. To Rey's surprise he signed in return with a slight nod and bow. He had a smile, tolerant smile of his own. Clearly, Mizuko thought Rey was joking. She raised the glass of whatever mixed drink the vampire had purchased for her and took a long drink. Rey noticed she kept her eyes on the vampire — the better to watch him and any sign he may make to her.

Then she signed something else to him, making Rey really wish she could understand American Sign Language. He chuckled and responded, "I see. Forgive me please, I wrongly assumed you were deaf. I had no idea you were only mute."

She signed something in response that looked complicated.

"Oh really? Now that's intriguing." He stood up and Mizuko hopped off her stool and stood aside. The vampire again bowed slightly, this time to Rey.

"My name is Remy Deprez." He glanced at Mizuko who was signing something. "I'm very pleased to make your acquaintance, Rey Lafitte. It appears that we have something in common with regard to our French heritage."

"Perhaps," Rey replied, and she continued in near flawless French "though exactly how much remains to be seen."

He laughed and replied, "I don't speak it. It's only the heritage through my family name that makes me claim any French heritage."

"That's a shame," Rey said, her Louisiana accent practically a purr. "I suppose it's a good thing, then, you're not related to someone bloodthirsty, like I am." She laughed.

He raised an eyebrow. "You're related to someone bloodthirsty? Not literally, I hope," he chuckled.

Mizuko finished her drink and closed her eyes for a moment. By the satisfied look on her face, she'd enjoyed whatever it was he'd bought her.

"Would I disappoint you if I said yes?" Rey let her smile turn a little bit wicked. "Jean LaFitte? was a great-uncle, and family legend says we've got some Blackbeard blood in our veins too." Now, she wasn't telling an out and out lie. Her adoptive parents were related to LaFitte?, but as to Edward Teach, well, there was just no knowing, was there. "I guess it kind of gives me an edge for picking out predators, you know?" She glanced at Mizuko. "I love her like a sister, and am very protective. I'd hate for her to get bitten, you know? There are so many guys trolling the clubs, looking for an easy score." She paused for a moment. "I hope you understand, and don't take offense."

Frankly, she couldn't care less if he took offense. No, that wasn't true. She really didn't want him to take offense. Taking offense could lead to trouble, the kind of trouble she doubted she and Mizuko could handle unprepared. The question remained, was what she just said going to cause the evening to end badly.

He smiled, but it was Mizuko who jabbed Rey in the arm. She was the one who looked offended and she rapidly signed in Glymjack, "I am *not* an easy score!" She hesitated and glanced at Remy, who was looking puzzled, then glared at Rey as if to scold her.

She smiled and blushed in embarrassment. If Rey could have understood her sign language, she would have seen Mizuko say, "I'm sorry Remy. She doesn't know American Sign."

"Ah," he said aloud. "English Sign, then? I wondered why I didn't recognize the gestures. No offense taken."

Rey chuckled slightly. "Thank you. I think I'm going to have to apologize to Mizuko, however. She believes I think she's an easy score. Nothing could be further from the truth. I can't tell you how many times I've seen men jump through flaming hoops for her." Again, the complete and utter truth - Rey couldn't say because she's never seen it happen.

Rey had no idea if Remy had picked up on her warnings, but she didn't want to risk being more obvious. She just wished she could find a way to get Mizuko to believe her. Remembering the werewolf she'd sensed, she scanned the crowd again, hoping to spot him. I told her she'd met a werewolf, Rey thought, perhaps if I can get her to meet another - and tell her the benefits of a werewolf lover - she might leave Remy behind.

Remy looked back at Mizuko and said, "I could believe men would jump for one so beautiful."

Mizuko blushed again.

Rey couldn't help but laugh. "Careful now," she teased Mizuko though her words were directed at Remy, "or you'll be turning her head so far she won't know which way is up."

Remy dared a slight breach of personal space. He reached out and touched Mizuko's chin and lifted her face so her eyes met his. "You have nothing to be ashamed of. It is the truth that your beauty surpasses all I have ever seen."

His words were sappy, yet he was so completely serious when he said it, Rey saw Mizuko's breath catch.

The vampire turned his gaze toward Rey and said, "I would so love to hear all about the both of you."

"There's not much to tell," Rey said with a shrug, surprised that she'd had reservations about the guy - even if he was a bloodsucker. "We both live in Mythic, and I'm the manager of the Mountain Garden Hotel & Casino. We met, what was it, about four, five months ago? We've been close friends ever since." She tilted her head slightly while looking at him. "I knew someone like you back in New Hampshire. Well, not exactly like you. Went by the name of Anne-Marie?. I don't suppose you've heard of her?"

He shook his head. "I'm afraid not. Do either of you have family here?"

"Family by choice," Rey replied easily. "No blood ties, but lots of friends who would miss us if we disappeared or worry if we started acting strange."

Remy blinked at her and was quiet for a moment. Then he nodded and said, "That is good. Friends like that are hard to come by. You seem like an extraordinarily perceptive person and I see how you look after Water Child."

He paused and touched Mizuko's arm. "I apologize. May I buy you another drink?"

Mizuko smiled and nodded quickly. She'd like nothing better.

"And for you?" He offered to buy one for Rey as well.

"No, thank you," she replied.

Remy placed the order and turned back to Rey and Mizuko. His eyes lingered on Mizuko, who was watching the bartender make her drink.

"Remy," Rey said, lowering her voice so that it didn't travel outside their small group. "You seem like a nice guy, but I know what you are. Ann-Marie? was one too. Miz and I aren't food, and I'd rather die before I let you turn either of us into ghouls. And please, don't deny I'm telling the truth."

The vampire's head whipped back at Rey and for a moment, his dark eyes hardened in anger as he stared at her. But he mastered his emotion and just as fast as it happened, calm replaced the anger. He sighed and was about to reply when Mizuko cut in.

"Rey!! I cannot believe you would say something like that to--" She froze, looking back at Remy and Rey who were both staring at her in spellbound surprise.

Mizuko blinked, then signed, "Did I just say that out loud?" She did it twice. Once in sign language and once in Glymjack sign. "That didn't just happen, did it?"

"Did what just happen?" Rey asked, though her gaze didn't stray from Remy's face. "I'm sorry, Remy. I really didn't want to make you angry. It's just... I've had some really bad experiences with... your people. I'd like to think you're not all the same, but it's difficult. I hope you understand." She really didn't want to make him angry, for several reasons. But he really did seem like a nice guy. Could she have been wrong by painting all vampires with the same brush?

Remy had been staring at Mizuko and then looked at Rey when she spoke. "Okay, first thing's first." He took Mizuko's free hand (her other was putting the glass down that had just been left by the bartender, and from which she'd taken a long drink). "Yes, my dear. You spoke. And it was a heavenly sound. Perhaps ..." he looked significantly at the glass, but did not suggest anything so rude as to indicate she might be drunk.

Mizuko looked at the glass and blinked. "Eh?"

He told Rey, "Rey, I mean no one harm. I'm sorry if you've had bad experiences, but I would never attempt something so clearly against your will. I am simply curious about you. I had hoped to spend a pleasant evening with your friend — if she is available and is not too upset. Nothing more. That said, I'm very curious. I would like to know more about you both."

He gently squeezed Mizuko's hand. She stared at his hand as if realizing he was touching her. "Your voice is magnificent. Special. It has qualities I've never heard before. I wish you would not hide it. I think, if you would allow it, I would like to hear it all night. I would never grow tired of hearing it."

His compliments stole her attention away from his hand on hers and she blinked at him.

Rey saw her eyes, her slightly parted lips and knew the man — no vampire — had said the right thing. She was attracted to him and wasn't pulling away from the forward gesture he'd made.

"Rey," he continued. "I admit you both have me intrigued. Will you leave me tormented by curiosity? Or might you allow me some insight about the two of you?"

Rey couldn't help herself. "Sometimes a bit of torment is a good thing," she teased.

He smiled. "Only if all parties agree," he said.

Mizuko looked back and forth between the two of them. She couldn't follow the flow of the conversation, so she took another drink.

"Mizuko," Rey said, and once she had her friend's attention, signed "I think you might be in danger of having too much to drink. Maybe you ought to lay off for a while so you can enjoy Remy's company more?"

She looked at Rey and then smiled bashfully. She put it down. "Sorry," she said quietly, hoping no one heard but the three of them. "*Do you really like my voice?*"

She knew better, of course. Her voice had been designed to be alluring by her Keeper. But she found she enjoyed the compliments this very charming man was giving her.

Remy nodded seriously. "It is spellbinding. If it wasn't too much to ask, I'd request a song, just so I could hear it."

Mizuko blushed again. "*Maybe... later...*" she said softly, hesitantly.

"Just don't leave with him without telling me, okay?" Rey signed. She couldn't help but be a bit jealous that Mizuko had found someone so nice so quickly, but her friend having fun was more important than her own gratification right now. "Don't forget, we drove here together and we really ought to leave here together."

Mizuko nodded.

"Of course," said Remy, "there is always room for two." He looked significantly toward Rey. "If something about me makes you uncomfortable, I invite you to stay a while. Let the evening unfold as it will, and let the chips fall where they may? Then you can form an informed decision about me."

Rey laughed softly. "I'm afraid I have problems sharing, and I don't poach. Thank you for the invitation, though."

He nodded, accepting her refusal. "May we retire to something more private? I thought they had some nice cushioned chairs over in the corner."

Mizuko nodded and smiled eagerly. He picked her glass up for her and led the way. The path he took brought them right past the man Rey had identified as a werewolf. He stared after Remy and Mizuko until they sat down, before he turned his attention away.

Rey picked up the drink she'd ordered that had been delivered while she was talking to Remy then set it back down. She no longer really wanted it, so she left it on the bar. Sulking about not finding someone wasn't going to help her mood, so she stood and strolled over in the direction of the werewolf and the people he was talking to. If she didn't recognize him, then she'd leave him alone and take a seat on the empty bench nearby. Someone would talk to her, sooner or later. If not, she could spend the time admiring

the werewolf's butt.

She didn't recognize the werewolf, though she knew he'd noticed her - out of the corner of her eye she'd seen his nostrils flare slightly when he caught her scent. He didn't move from his circle of friends, so she continued on to the bench. As she sat, she sensed someone behind her a split second before he spoke. "May I join you?"

Rey looked up and saw it was the Changeling from the bar, the one she'd bought the drink for. While she didn't have any expectations, she was surprised to hear his cultured Russian accent. Now that he was closer, Rey could see that his skin was covered with fine black scales, glossy like a snake's. He smiled, giving her a glimpse of sharp, brilliant white fangs.

"Sure," she replied and shifted over to give him more room. Rey crossed her legs in a very ladylike (and seductive through no fault of her own) manner and made herself comfortable. He was wearing taupe casual trousers and a dark green polo shirt, and there was a mild sense of formality around him, the kind you'd expect from an Old World aristocrat.

"I wanted to thank you for the drink," he said in that Russian accent. Hearing more of it, she could detect a British flavor perhaps where he'd learned English. He waved the drink a little. "Thank you."

He paused to take in Rey's own fae mien, examining each part quickly and not staring.

"The bartender told you, huh," Rey replied with an embarrassed little smile. "I'm glad you weren't offended. It just seemed like the right thing to do." She patted the bench next to her. "Please, have a seat."

He sat down. "Welcome to my little establishment. I notice I have not seen you here before. Were you exploring a little, then?"

Oh god, Rey thought, I bought the owner a drink in his own bar. "I guess you could say that. My friend and I live in Mythic, but I come to Santa Fe once in a while and I wanted to check out some places here." She laughed softly. "It probably sounds like a horrible line, but I really do love the look of the place. I love wood, especially stuff that's not all covered up with bright artificial colors.

"My name's Rey," she said, extending her hand in trust.

He took it and gave a single, firm shake. "Thank you. I am proud of this place, it is true." He glanced around the room and noted something. "Ah yes. The attractive young lady that came in with you and that is speaking with Mr. Deprez. Well, I trust the two of you have found things to match your tastes.

"You mentioned Mythic. Are you part of the larger organization there?" he asked.

Rey nodded. "I'm a member of the Desert Duchy, and a Lord Sage of the Unknown Reaches." That was information she didn't think was a problem sharing. She glanced over in the direction of Mizuko and saw the two were cozily ensconced in side by side chairs. "My friend has definitely found something, though I haven't. Then again, I'm not really looking."

"I'm pleased to make your acquaintance, Rey. I am Alexei." The snake-scaled Russian glanced to the place Rey looked, as well. "Ah, I see. That man she is with is a person of interest I would say." He took a careful look at Mizuko, then shook his head. "Is she... bound in trust?" he asked in a quiet voice.

"She is the keeper of my secrets and can see as us we truly are," Rey replied, but that was as far as she was

willing to reveal Mizuko's secrets. "I trust her with my life, and she with me. Do you know Mr. Deprez well?"

Alexei was thoughtful when he said, "Nyet. I know there is something... unusual about him and that he comes here often. He has never caused trouble for me, although I have seen him take issue with men who fail to treat their dates with respect in public. These things are never dealt with here in the club, however. Always outside."

"Interesting," Rey murmured. "I suppose, then, that my friend is about as safe as she can be, given what he is." And the warning she gave, though she had no idea if she could back it up. Seeing the drink in Alexei's hand reminded her of her forgotten drink and how she'd left it on the bar. She signaled one of the servers going by, intending to order.

Alexei waited for Rey to finish ordering, but did not presume to order for her. In his mind, they were having a conversation but not a date. At least for now.

"It sounds like you know what makes Mr. Deprez special. Would you care to share?"

Rey looked at Alexei, weighing his request. She did not normally share secrets, but ignorance of Remy's true nature could be a bad thing. Or a good thing, if it kept Alexei and those who depended upon him safe. She sensed he was trustworthy, but tended not to look too closely at people in the club who didn't cause any trouble. "Are you sure you want to know?" she asked in return. "That knowledge might not do you any favors."

He considered that for a minute. "Nyet. I suppose I do not," he admitted. "If you feel your trusted friend is safe with him, then what concern is it of mine?"

"What you told me of his behavior here is reassuring." Though one doesn't usually shit where one eats, she added silently. "How long have you owned Corazon?" She asked, steering the conversation back onto less controversial subjects.

"About eight years," replied Alexei.

"Are there many of our... cousins in Santa Fe?" Rey thought calling other Changeling cousins was about as innocuous a name as she could come up with. She was curious about the Changelings here, and whether or not they were part of the Duchy, for she didn't know if the boundaries extended beyond Mythic City.

"Some. Santa Fe is much smaller than Mythic, of course, so there are proportionally fewer," he stated. The terms were general, but if Santa Fe was 1/10th the size of Mythic, he seemed to be saying that the number of changelings dwelling in Santa Fe was likewise about 1/10th the number of those in Mythic.

"That makes for a nice cozy little group. Is there a chance I might meet any of the others tonight?" Rey asked. She was genuinely curious, and interested in meeting more Changelings. She felt almost at ease with them as she did werewolves, which was rather strange in many ways. Perhaps it was because her life before she was Taken had become so intricately intertwined with them.

"I couldn't say," Alexei stated. "They are not regulars here. Many different... people come here and so many of our cousins are shy about such things."

"That's a shame," Rey said, disappointed. "I'd have thought an establishment owned by one of us would have been considered safe. But I understand. People like Mr. Deprez and one of the gentlemen over there," she kind of waved her hand in the direction of where she'd last seen the werewolf, "can be frightening, especially to those who aren't that familiar with them." She looked at Alexei curiously. "Would you mind if I were to visit once in a while? Or do you prefer your solitude." Rey remembered the almost painful loneliness she'd seen, and wondered if it was by choice.

"Madam," he chuckled, "a club thrives on company. Feel free to visit any time. I'm here most nights."

"My question was for you, Alexei," she said softly. "Unless you and your club are inseparable." Rey wasn't flirting with him, at least not intentionally. "I find myself enjoying your company, as brief as it has been so far."

"I see," he said. And then, "Well, I'm certain that once you get to know me you'll realize just how boring I really am." He smiled, flashing those white fangs again, but he was in good humor.

"I have to admit the same worry had crossed my mind," Rey returned with a smile of her own, "that you'd think you've met one Fairest, you've met them all."

"I don't know about the rest of them, but I wouldn't mind if one Fairest might come around for a visit now and again."

Rey looked around, and in mock innocence, "I do hope you're talking about me," she said, holding back a laugh. "Right?"

"Indeed," he replied with a wink.

"That's a relief," she answered with a grin. She reached into her tiny purse and took out a business card. After quickly writing her cell phone number on the back, she moved to offer it but hesitated. "Would you like my card?" She chuckled. "I won't be offended if you say no." Rey figured that since she knew where Alexei worked, it wouldn't hurt if he knew the same about her.

He accepted it and took a look. "You're the casino manager?"

"Yes," Rey replied with a nod. "And don't ask me about gambling, because I don't. I can't afford to leave my salary at work." She chuckled. "I leave enough of it at the restaurants as it is. I hate cooking for one or two."

He put the card in a pocket and watched the bartender and clientele interact for a few minutes. He seemed to be thinking.

"So," he said finally, "you seem to know some things about special people, such as the person your friend is speaking with and are not shy to say so. I also note you have markings that seem in addition to your... special natures. Markings that suggest knowledge."

"How does the line go?" Rey said, "I don't know as much as I'd like too, but more than many special people would like. I specialize in one particular kind of them, with a smattering of knowledge in others. It is what brought me to the attention of a group of our cousins, who offered me membership in their order, granting me the title of Lady Sage." She smiled wryly. "I don't normally go around announcing it. More pretentious than I'm used to."

"Nor do I normally go around and reveal what I know of other people's secrets. Their secrets are not mine to tell, but I was concerned about Mr. Deprez being a threat. Still, he knows that I know, and what will happen if my friend is harmed. I don't think he will harm her, but you never can tell."

Alexei's eyes roved to Deprez, still engrossed in some quiet verbal conversation with Mizuko. "If he is dangerous, and he does harm her, is there really anything that could be done about it?"

"Everything has a weakness," Rey replied. "I know who I can ask to find out specifics, and I have friends who will help. Whether or not an attempt would be successful, that's another story." She glanced at Mizuko and looked back at Alexei. "I hope it won't come to that."

The Russian pushed himself back a little, folded his leg and rocked back on his chair in thought. Presently he sighed. "Da. I once thought as you. When you are young you think people are reasonable, that you can do anything. But the truth is, if that man does something to harm your friend, then nothing you do will ever undo that. Nor will unspoken threats protect her. You must decide, my friend. Is it better to react if something should happen? Or try to stop it from happening in the first place?"

"Is not my business," he said in a thickening Russian accent. "Is yours to do with as you think right. These days, it is best for me to stay out of such things. I have too much to lose."

"I understand," Rey said. "I certainly wouldn't want anything to happen at the casino. Still, she's a big girl and can take care of herself. The best I can do right now is be there to pick up the pieces. That's what friends are for."

"Yes, the ability to perceive us as we truly are is poor defense against what you seem to be concerned about," he pointed out. "She is only human, after all."

"The biggest problem I face," Rey added, "is a simple lack of belief. She knows we exist, but thinks my stories about other special people is purely fiction."

He chuckled, seeming to set the matter aside. "I see. Well, we must all learn and grow some time."

A thoughtful look crossed Rey's face as she debated something. When she made a decision, she spoke. "You mentioned many different kinds of people come here. I could teach you some of what I know, if you have something to offer in return?"

He looked at her with renewed interest. "I think I must carefully guard what I do and do not know. I prefer to trade in favors more than information. Favors are much more useful to me, especially in helping me maintain my neutrality, shall we say. So, I am much more used to ... marketing I suppose you might say."

"Understandable," Rey said. "There's no use in giving a television to a blind man."

"Or a man who simply does not watch TV." He smiled. "I do trade. It's simply that my trade is quite specific. Some come here to bargain, to make deals for their own success. I am chosen because I am no goblin promise-maker. I am a pledge crafter with a reputation for neutrality. If a fair deal is to be made, some few will seek me here. I will give them a deal or draft them a pledge in exchange for a small favor now and again."

It was Rey's turn to have her interest piqued. "A pledge crafter. That is definitely something that intrigues me. I have long understood the power of words and promises. I've found myself lately in a position where knowing how pledges work would have been very useful." And now she wondered if she might have said too much, making herself sound far too eager to learn something that gave him a special place in the changeling community here.

"It can be a very valuable skill," he agreed. "One perhaps more of our... cousins should pay attention to."

Rey tried not to snort. "I've seen that first-hand." Fortune favors the bold, she thought, and pressed forward. "Would you be willing to teach me what you know?"

"Of course. For a favor, you understand. Making a name for yourself as a pledgesmith means first you must be adept with words. How a pledge is worded will determine its effectiveness. I can teach you some things that specifically relate to how to use language effectively when studying or making a pledge. It is however, no replacement for good language skills. It builds on them. What I have to teach is not something you can learn in a night or a week. It will require study and practice."

"Nothing worthwhile ever comes early," Rey replied. "I agree to your price, providing the favor is of equal value to what you are teaching me." She suspected that was a given, but she felt it still needed to be said.

"Since the value of such a skill varies depending on what you might use it for, let us just say this if it is agreeable to you. As a favor to me, you will use what skill in pledge-smithing I may impart to you within your own freehold, but that if requested to employ it in mine, you will direct them to deal with me. If this is not done, then you make a promise upon your own skill that you will owe me a large favor in replace of this small one."

"So I can use what you teach me for pledges involving myself, but not on behalf of someone else, correct?" When Alexi nodded, she said "I agree."

"Your first assignment then, is this. Form what we have agreed to informally into a pledge you would believe is fair to all parties and that you would swear to and return to me in a week. We shall look at your homework together and see how it might be improved."

"Homework," Rey said with a little grin. "It's been a long time since I've heard that word applied to me. I'll meet you here, then?"

He nodded and said, "I look forward to seeing you. Now, unfortunately, I must retreat to the back office for a while. Paperwork, you know. Even in a place like this, it never ends."

"You have my sympathies," Rey said and extended her hand. "It was a pleasure to meet you."

He took her hand and responded with a firm, single shake and nod of his head before he made his way slowly to the back of the club.

Mizuko was enjoying the attention. And the drink. The best part was that she didn't know what was going to happen next. It had been a long, long time since these things had been like that.

Of course, the last time she'd attracted a man, it had been for her Keeper. That time and every time before that it had always been the same. He'd leave her at her spring with its unclimbable walls and slick sides and she'd wait for days. Then he'd come along and ask her to sing or to bathe, or some other thing. Invariably, some young man would come stumbling down the slope, having seen her from some distance away. She never knew where they'd come from, but she supposed her Keeper had simply cleared a portal and made an illusion over it so she wouldn't notice. Someone would wander by and see her through the one-way portal and, caught by her beauty or her Song, would come to her. That ended exactly the same way, every time. Her Keeper would arrive acting as if he were in a jealous rage, and take the man away.

Well, she was free now. Still some part of her had always feared that if she might try to attract a man again, her Keeper would appear again, this time to take them both away.

As she thought about it, she realized she was still afraid it might happen in a very real sense. That was why it was so easy to take drink. It made it easier to ignore the fear that left her nerves feeling like they were vibrating and keep the quaver from her voice and hands. If only this one time she might enjoy the company of someone who thought her beautiful and they did not get taken away, she told herself, maybe she could get over this irrational fear. Maybe she could move on.

Or maybe she would be dragged to Faerie. She took another drink and finished her glass, then focused on what Remy was saying to her.

"You and your friend," Remy said, "have you known each other long?"

"*Four or five months,*" she told him quietly. Her voice tended to carry so she spoke barely above a whisper. She didn't mind that he had to lean a little closer to her to hear, and hoped he didn't either.

Remy couldn't help but smile from the pleasure of hearing her voice. "How did you meet?" He wanted to glance over at the enigma that was her friend, but courtesy forbade it. As much as he wanted to spend the rest of the evening with the beautiful woman next to him, her friend had made him cautious.

"*I was fleeing some would-be kidnappers when I fell into the train tracks at the station near Iron Mountain,*" she answered. "*She was among a very few who took interest in my situation and helped me. We became friends after that and she took me in.*"

"That would explain her protectiveness." Remy reached out to gently stroke the side of Mizuko's face with the backs of his fingertips. "I hope you don't think you need protecting from me."

She blushed at his touch and was a little embarrassed by her own reaction. She was a changeling, she told herself. She should get a better handle on her own emotions. But the truth was that ever since her Keeper took her away, she'd felt out of touch with her own emotions. Now, when something was happening to cause them, she didn't know *how* to control them. Between the skittish, irrational fear she felt that this might end badly and the undeniable attraction she felt, she realized she didn't have much control at all.

"*No,*" she replied softly. She thought her voice might catch so she said no more than that in response to his question.

"I'm glad to hear that." His voice was like a warm velvet caress. "Is this your first visit to Corazon?"

She nodded coyly. She looked around, since she really hadn't looked at the place beyond the bar and Remy. "*I'm from Mythic.*"

"Was it your idea to come here tonight?" he asked, the undertone of his voice made her think he hoped she was going to say yes.

"*This is a long way from where I usually hang out, so no. Rey wanted to get away from things though, and invited me to come with.*" A smile flickered into existence briefly, just enough to curl her lips. "*I'm glad I did.*"

"As am I. I'm going to have to find a way to thank Rey." He reached out and traced the outline of her lower lip with the faintest of touches. "You should smile more often. It lights up your entire face and puts me in danger of losing my heart."

She bit her lip while pulling away slightly to hide her amusement. "*If you keep making me blush, I'm afraid you'll think I'm sick or something.*"

"Is that a challenge I hear," he asked as he leaned in closer. "Nothing would make me happier than to tend to you, and take care of your every need." His lips brushed her cheek as he moved to whisper in her ear "every need."

A shiver ran through her in response to the feathery brush of air across her ear as he spoke. "*Remy, there is only one way I know to find out if you can.*" She ducked and turned, a small, quick movement, and she had her lips pressed against his before she thought about it too much.

Remy didn't hesitate, willingly accepting her kiss. Slowly he drew more, teasing and tempting her to make it

deeper. Carefully, gently, he put his hands around her and drew her into his lap.

Mizuko hardly knew it, she was so focused on the kiss. A real, actual kiss. She couldn't remember the last time she'd experienced a kiss like that. Maybe, she decided, she hadn't ever. When she was taken, she was a young runaway with almost no experience with boys. Now she was a young woman and in all that time since she was that runaway, she'd never maintained a relationship other than friendship.

She made little sounds as the kiss deepened and raised her own hands to cup his face. Beneath her thigh she felt him harden and he shifted her to bring her closer even as he gradually brought the kiss to a halt. "We have all night, my sweet," he said, his voice a low, husky rumble. "That is, if you think I have a chance to give you what you need."

"*All night?*" she said with a wicked little smile that touched one side of her lips and produced a sparkle in her eyes. "*That sounds like just about the right amount of time to find out.*" She hadn't taken her hands away from him but clasped them behind his neck. She had to lace her fingers, otherwise she knew her own curiosity would guide them to places he might find inappropriate in this setting.

"I'm in the mood to dance," Remy said, gently taking her lower lip between her teeth and giving it a tug. "The music here, though, isn't appropriate." In fact, the music playing right now was more for ambiance than for dancing of any kind. "We could go... somewhere else...." He caressed the curve of her hip with his right hand, his fingers coming to a stop just below the hem of her skirt.

She took a moment to relish the thrill of his touch. "*Dance? I haven't danced in a while, but I'm a good dancer. Lead me to the dance, sir; I will be at your side.*"

"What kind of dancing do you prefer?" he asked, fingertips teasing just beneath her skirt, stroking the warm flesh of her outer thigh.

"*Any kind that includes a partner,*" she said with no hesitation. "*And your preference?*" She wiggled her hips just a little to enjoy feeling him tight against her.

"I enjoy all kinds. Sometimes I even enjoy watching someone dance by themselves for a while before I join them." Remy watched her eyes carefully, letting her know with a look how much he'd enjoyed her little dance so far. "I have a little place nearby that will give us privacy, something I must insist on if we are to continue."

Mizuko was still as she considered. "*We only just met. Would you think less of me if I went with you?*" She watched his eyes carefully as well.

Remy took her hand and pressed her fingers to his lips, bathing them in the heat of his breath as he spoke. "No," he replied. "I would consider it a great privilege if you allowed me to express my appreciation of you and your beauty. But it must be a decision you are comfortable with. I will not hold it against you if you say either yes or no, though if you say yes," he slipped one of her fingers into his mouth, lathing it with his tongue before sucking on it slightly. "I will do my best to make certain you do not regret it."

She couldn't take her eyes off his lips. Her mind kept thinking of so many creative uses for them, it took considerable effort to focus on something she had thought important. Something that might have caused her to rethink what she was doing, what she might allow very soon. She shifted her eyes to meet his again in preparation to tell him something.

Then she melted. Looking into those deep, dark eyes, she realized that nothing else was as important to her right now than simply finding out where all this would go. And she believed him.

"*Then I would like to see your place,*" she said softly.

Remy stood with a fluid motion, lifting her and setting her elegantly down on her feet as he stood without needing so much as a twitch of fabric to put her skirt back into place. He took a step back and in that moment she could see how well he filled out his trousers. With a small elegant bow, he offered Mizuko his arm.

She looked him up and down. The small smile that now graced her lips and the bright shine to her eyes proclaimed her approval. She placed her hand on his arm and stepped close to him.

With the utmost ease and courtesy, Remy led Mizuko from the club and out into the slowly chilling night. "Our destination is not very far," he whispered into her ear. "And then we will be warm again."

Although not tall by modern standards, Remy still stood a good six inches taller than Mizuko might, if she were wearing flat-heeled shoes. As it was, she gazed up at him past a height difference of only a few inches, thanks to high heels she wore. They were stylish, but not stiletto, so that she could walk in them but still showed the curve of well-developed calves. In reply, she squeezed his arm in reassurance that she didn't mind the cool weather. After all, she spent a lot of time in her cold-water ponds and springs, so she had a lot of tolerance to cold. That, and for many other good reasons of which Remy had no idea.

They walked down the street in the direction opposite Mizuko and Rey had arrived. Turning a corner, he led her half a block down to a small doorway with an old fashioned wrought iron gate blocking it. Remy produced a key out of nowhere and unlocked it, then ushered Mizuko through.

The tiny passageway opened up into a small courtyard from which a few doors opened onto. He escorted her to the first door on the left. "And here we are," he said. Remy moved to stand behind her and pressed himself close to her back. He reached around her to open the door, then waited for her to precede him into the room.

She paused a moment, her head swiveling this way and that. She drew in an impressed breath.

It might be foolish, as she often told herself, but a home always impressed her. Rey had a home she shared with Mizuko and that she had found amazing. She knew a lot of people had homes, but someone who had spent many years living in the open (or as open as the Hedge or Arcadia might be) or in a park never again took for granted the comfort that warmth and shelter provided.

She hadn't yet even seen the inside, but she asked "*This is all yours?*"

"It's not much," he said humbly, "but it is mine." Remy reached past her to turn on the light to reveal a room given over to the seduction of the senses and indulging all manner of the subtler vices. A huge bed dominated one wall, covered in plush cushions and a rich brocaded comforter. A small hearth in another wall had the fire set, waiting to be lit. A small but apparently well stocked bar was in the corner, and the polished wooden floor was covered in soft-looking rugs.

Mizuko entered the small dwelling and looked around, taking in everything slowly. She then went to the primary piece of furniture and knelt beside it, running her hands over the comforter and squeezing the pillows. Softer, she decided, than her own and she'd thought them luxurious. Then again, most things that were not damp rocks were in comparison.

Her behavior was a little bizarre, but she had no idea how it looked to Remy. She found the drinks she'd practically chugged had made her mind a little fuzzy, and not just a little bit less inhibited. Still, her reactions were honest, unrehearsed, and revealed a simple wonderment that one would not expect in a mature woman.

Remy shut the door and watched her with an indulgent smile edged with anticipation. If she was a

sensualist, then he had many, many things to delight her with. "Do you like it?"

"*It feels so good,*" she said with a sigh. She stood and turned toward him, but she stood too fast and was left blinking as the blood rushed from her head. The alcohol didn't help her balance at all and she teetered.

A few swift steps put Remy at her side, pulling her into his arms. "Why don't we have something to eat," he said, steering her toward one of the very comfortably appointed chairs.

She leaned on him gratefully a moment as her vision cleared. "*Food sounds good,*" she agreed. She drifted over to the chairs.

Remy seated her then retrieved a plate of food from a refrigerator behind the bar. When he placed it in front of Mizuko, she saw it was a selection of different fruits, cold cuts and cheese, all things cut small enough to eat easily with your fingers.

Mizuko looked at the food with surprised delight. She tried a couple pieces, then looked up at him. "*This is really good,*" she said. She half closed her eyes and chewed slowly.

He knelt next to her and took her free hand in his. "I'm glad you like it." Remy watched her as she ate, idly stroking the inside of her wrist with his thumb. When she bit into a small piece of meat into her mouth, his tongue darted out to taste that sensitive piece of flesh he was caressing.

She made a little sound as her breath caught. Mizuko had no idea she had an erogenous zone there, so easily accessible to him. She swallowed quickly and turned away from the food. Heat rose within her and colored her cheeks as her heart sped up again. She sat back and enjoyed the moment.

Then, with fire in her eyes, she pulled him closer and wrapped her legs around him, then began slowly working at the top four buttons of his green silk shirt. The material felt nice and it made her pause just enough for her to realize this is what real silk felt like, as opposed to the cheap, artificial fiber look-alikes that the hookers employed to draw the eye and potential clients. Once she had the buttons undone, she took a look at his bare chest with impish delight.

She slid off the stool Remy had seated her upon and slipped behind him and wrapped her arms around him, caressing his chest and tangling her fingers in the fine hair there. Her body was pressed against him and he could feel her nipples softly pressing against him through two layers of clothing. Mizuko swayed with him as if in time to unheard, gentle music, her left hand continuing to caress his chest and circle his nipples while her left explored the taut abdominal muscles.

A soft, deep noise of appreciation slipped from him as he pressed back against her but otherwise didn't move, giving her the opportunity to explore.

Her breath was warm against his back as her hands roved inside his shirt. His remaining buttons got in the way, but her slender, deft fingers opened them easily. She pulled his shirttails free and ran her nails up and down his chest, scratching him enough to bring forth sharp sensation without breaking or damaging his skin.

His breath caught in a sharp hiss and he pivoted in her arms to face her, an expression of naked lust burning in his eyes. "Strip for me."

She stepped back from him and made a decision. If he wanted a show, she'd give him a show such as he'd never seen before. She took a breath and closed her eyes for a moment to give the slight, spinning feeling subsided a moment. Then she began to sing.

It was a wordless tune, part hum, sad and somber yet beautiful. Small motions formed a dance that made one think immediately of a wondrous nymph preparing to bathe at a pond or bend of a river. The fact that's

exactly what she was was drowned beneath a gorgeous, but mortal-seeming body. Her motions held strength and beauty. They weren't the crassly seductive moves of a stripper or a foolish girl thinking to use cheap moves she saw on TV or the movies to amuse a suitor. Instead she sang and removed each article with a delicate, sensual care of a uniquely erotic woman who was simply being herself, showing a part of herself that it seemed was for Remy's eyes only.

Remy stood there, entranced by both Mizuko's voice and her body. He couldn't, wouldn't take her eyes off her. What he wanted before, he found himself desperately needing. He closed the distance between them and joined her dance, hands lightly skimming over her, exploring her as she started to explore him.

She willingly gave herself to his curiosity, shivering with excitement from time to time. She was still nervous, and that fear she kept trying to bury back down within her was delicious in a masochistic kind of way. She didn't care. She just wanted to feel him touch her and didn't want it to stop. At some point her top had fallen away and her little skirt had as well.

He cupped her breasts in his hands as if weighing a fruit he wanted to devour whole. Remy, now facing her, rubbed himself against her slowly and whispered "take my clothes off" before taking her earlobe between his teeth and tugging on it slightly.

She folded his opened shirt down off his shoulders and one motion had it settling softly across a stool. Then she guided him to the nearby bed. As he sat watching her, she gracefully slipped first one boot off and then the other. While she unbuckled his belt, he stood for her again. With the buckle free, she grabbed it firmly and then whipped it free with a sudden, strong motion, then dumped it on the floor.

Mizuko used her teeth to force the button at the top of his pants apart and again he felt her hot breath warm his skin. She got hold of his pants and worked them down so that by the time he was sitting on the bed again, she'd pulled them free.

She rose to her feet as her song came to an end garbed only in the several silver necklaces with crosses and her high heeled shoes.

He smiled as he stood and turned her so her back was to the bed and pressed a kiss to her temple. The kisses moved lower, each one punctuation by a lick or nibble that sent thrills through her. He paused at her breasts, taking each nipple in turn into his mouth lathing them with his tongue before giving the a quick, almost painful nip.

She arched her back and made small whimpering sounds. The silver necklaces tinkled as they fell to the side of her slender neck. *"Take me,"* she breathed, practically begging. *"Take me gently first. Then take me like an animal."*

He seemed to ignore her words, taking his time to lavish attention to every part of her body. Where his mouth and touch couldn't reach, his fingers could. Every caress wound her tighter and tighter until she felt his hot breath on the inside of her thighs. Gentle kisses worked their way higher until his lips touched her soaked folds.

His tongue traced her flesh, and as his hands tightened on her rear, supporting her, he dipped between those lower lips with a slow, long lick. Her legs shook and she sighed, letting herself adrift in the sensation he gave her, but he didn't let her fall.

He pressed her closer, his tongue sliding deeper and deeper until it found her entrance. He almost immediately backed off, taking time to torment the highly sensitive nub. Back and forth his tongue slid in a steady rhythm, a delicious torture of sensation until she felt something else touch her.

Mizuko had been so caught up in what Remy was doing she hadn't noticed he'd changed his grip on her.

His fingers sank into her, filling her, as he increased his attack on her clit. He withdrew his fingers almost all the way out, only the thrust them back into her in a slow, steady beat matched by his tongue. Slowly but surely, he brought her to a fever pitch, caught on the precipice and unable to fly over it.

She *felt* so warm, so hot she thought she might burst into flame. After so long knowing only the soothing caress of her waters, this was like an inferno. She loved it even as she teetered on the brink, kept from toppling into a sea of pleasure by his certain, confident skill. It made her want to beg for more, to grab him and force herself onto him and some tiny voice floating upon the stormy sea of sensation within her mind told her that this was good, that she should probably stop her.

Stupid, idiot voice. She wanted him now and she didn't care about anything else. Her breath came in whispery gasps. She let herself fall and he would catch her or not; she didn't care. She would be at his mercy and she'd worship him for it.

As if he could read her mind, the path of his fingers changed. He stroked a spot deep inside her once, twice, and the third time the world in her head exploded. The release she felt was incredible. Her body tightened and spasmed as if it existed beyond control of her mind. She tightened and released so hard, she actually couldn't breathe for a nearly a minute. As the orgasm began to subside she found she lay limply on the bed with no memory how she came to be lying down. She had time to be embarrassed because she thought that he must be very experienced and would know how little she had done this and how deeply she'd needed it.

When everything finally calmed down, Mizuko found herself on the bed, gathered close in Remy's arms with his forceful erection jutting against her rear. "Ready for round two?" he asked with a wicked laugh.

She was fuzzy and dreamy, but the alcohol was only partly to blame. Her body felt like it was still floating, but she wanted him inside her with an intensity that surprised herself. She moved her ass so that her nethers rubbed against him with wet need.

He rolled her onto her back without a word and paid homage to her beauty as he had before, but more forcefully, stopping just short of what would hurt her. He was rough, demanding, everything she'd asked him to be.

Remy brought her back to a fever pitch faster than she thought possibly, her need almost painful. With a growl, he flipped her onto her stomach, yanked her hips into the air and surged into her from behind.

She made a pained sound as he stretched her, but the pleasure of him overrode any discomfort. A moment later she found herself pushing into his thrusts, taking him as deeply as he could go. The very world around her seemed to awaken and whisper things to her, sometimes sweet, sometimes naughty, though when she blinked and looked hard, there was nothing there. So she closed her eyes and tried to ignore the little voices that were encouraging her to let go, give herself over.

She already had, anyway. Her body was his to command in this moment and now she gave herself to him, wanted him to use her to find the same ecstasy he'd given her. The way he mounted her called to something very deeply primal within her.

Remy growled "not enough" and withdrew from her, ignoring her cry of loss. He hauled her up off the bed and practically slammed her against the wall, pinning her breast to hip against the wood paneling when he pounded himself into her once more. Every powerful thrust forced her to shift up along the wall. He grabbed her hands and slapped them against the wall, holding them there with surprising strength as he bit her on the shoulder just hard enough for her to feel it.

She moaned, but murmured between the beats of their passion, "*Don't stop.*"

He kept the pounding of his hips going, staying just short of leaving bruises. As he bit his way along her bare,

slender, sweat-slick shoulder, his pace increased. Together, they beat a staccato rhythm against the wall until Mizuko felt a sharp pain in the curve of her neck. She was swamped anew by pure pleasure until she heard Remy's scream of utter horror.

Her heart leapt into her throat, thinking that he must have bit his tongue somehow and might choke. He lay writhing on the floor, a mouthful of blood running down his chin and the sides of his face. His eyes were wide, hands flailing at some unseen enemy.

She had fallen when he had dropped away from her, but she scrambled now to him. Avoiding his blindly flailing arms, she knew that if he was choking or seizing or something, she needed to help him clear passageways, so she knelt at his head and took him gently onto her lap, where she let him turn as he would to clear the blood while she tried to help calm him with the human-like warmth of her thighs and by smoothing his hair and touching his cheeks with her fingers. She spoke soft words of comfort. *"It's all right,"* she said, trying to mask the quiet, alarmed desperation in her voice. *"You're safe. It's going to be okay,"* she told him several times in what she hoped was a reassuring voice. *"Please don't die, it's all okay, you're okay."*

He cringed away from her, pushing at her hands. "No," he half screamed. "Leave before..." The last word was garbled as he choked and whipped his head to the side. Something bothered her about what he'd said. The word was so familiar, and while she couldn't place it, it scared her.

When she shrugged, trying to hold Remy still, Mizuko noticed her neck was starting to hurt, and felt something warm trickling down her skin. She suddenly disliked the distraction and she tapped a tiny bit of glamour, calling upon her elemental nature to shut down or mute the small things. Instantly the hurt faded and disappeared. She brushed at the crimson rivulet in annoyance, then concentrated on providing succor to Remy, taking in his fear and her own and processing it without thought. It wasn't a harvest of emotion, just an acceptance of what he was feeling, a changeling's attempt to empathize.

After a few moments, Remy's movements became last frantic, and when his eyes met hers again, she would see him in them. "What happened?" His voice was falsely strong as he tried to regain control of himself.

*"I do not know,"* she told him truthfully. *"I... we were having sex. And then I thought you were choking or something. Maybe we were lost in the moment and you bit your tongue? Here, show me your tongue. I want to see if you're okay."*

He was stuck staring at her for a moment, caught up again in her voice. "No, I'm fine. I just need to go to tidy up a bit." Remy struggled to his feet, not quite refusing Mizuko's help, and padded across the room to a door she hadn't noticed before. The quick glance she got before the door closed was white tiled floors, probably a bathroom.

Mizuko followed and when the door closed behind him, she leaned against the wall and slid down it to the floor. Confused and surprised and worried, she had no idea what had just happened.

After what seemed like a lifetime, the door opened to reveal a calmer - and cleaner - Remy, though still nude in all his glory. He knelt down next to her and took her hand. "I'm sorry to have taken so long, Water Child." He gave it a reassuring squeeze. "Would you like some help getting cleaned up, or would you prefer to do it on your own?"

As far as she knew, he hadn't finished, so she figured the cleanup would be brief and not embarrassing. She smiled her answer to him and let him help her to her feet.

But she was still worried about him. She knew it was just his way to think of the woman first and guessed that she should let him behave the way he was most comfortable. *"Thank you."*

She let him take her into the bathroom before she said, *"Please, you can call me Mizuko. I don't speak*

*Japanese, but my parents did and that's the name they gave me. There isn't a translation in sign, so the words water child, which is what Mizuko means, is what I use in sign."*

"Mizuko," he replied with a smile. "It is much lovelier than Water Child."

*"Remy. Are you all right? I'd like to talk about what happened."*

"I'm fine," he replied, in a tone that implied he really didn't want to talk about it.

She blinked and turned away to look in the mirror. She looked at herself, something she rarely did. She took no note of the bite mark and blood except to stare blankly at the trickle that had been left to dry on her skin and the smear she'd made when she had brushed at it. Instead she saw the changeling in the mirror staring back. It hit her hard then that she was not what she appeared to mortals to be. The creature in the mirror was beautiful but it was a beauty of frightening intensity. Her own inhumanly purple eyes looked unfamiliar and cold. Her skin looked pale and damp, her hair wild and populated with unruly streaks of blue.

Remy was not new at this, she told herself. She was. She was the factor that was different here. He looked like he'd nearly died on the floor when things got a little heated. Tears tumbled out of her eyes and ran down her cheeks. She'd been the one to deceive Remy, just like she always had done for her Keeper, she realized. This was her own fault.

*"I'm so sorry, Remy." Tears continued, though her voice seemed calm and still. Her emotions were disjoint, disconnected from her words. "This is my fault. I wanted this — to be with you. But I was not honest with myself, or with you, and you suffered for it somehow."*

"What do you mean?" he said, wiping a tear away with a gentle thumb.

*"I'm just a runaway, Remy. Nobody important. But I was taken off the streets, kidnapped, and used as bait to lure others so that my kidnapper could take them and hurt them. That part of my life is gone, but it still happens. You were drawn to me and you were hurt, too. I'm a... a nymph. A siren that calls men to their doom. It is always like that. I do not know why I should have thought it would be different now."* The creature in the mirror mimicked her words but in sign, not with her lips, though only Mizuko saw her. It made her so angry she wanted to break the glass. Instead, she balled her fists and kept them at her side until she weathered her stormy emotions and calmed.

Remy pulled her into his arms and guided her out of the bathroom. "It's okay, Mizuko. It was an accident." He laughed softly. "I'd like to think I have full control of all my faculties. Yes, I was drawn to your beauty, but you... you are exciting. You've made me feel things I haven't in a very long time." He bent his head to brush a kiss on her cheek.

She turned and put her arms around him. His lips met hers in a gentle kiss.

*"I did?"* Her eyes were large and innocent. *"What did I do?"*

"You were just being you," he whispered in reply. "Helped me remember what it was to feel young again. It seems like it's been forever since I've felt that freedom." Remy nuzzled the side of her neck, and she could feel his arousal growing again.

She began to relax, though a knot of worry buried deep in her stomach refused to unwind. Without knowing what had happened, she wasn't sure what she could do to prevent it happening again. Out of the corner of her eye she saw her image in the mirror smile wickedly at her and signed something. "Show him a little appreciation," the Mirror Mizuko told her. "If you want to make this better, then you need to make him feel better."

Mizuko blinked at the reflection. "Go on," it seemed to say. "Don't be such a coward." She swallowed and decided to take the chance.

She started by running her hands over the smooth skin of his back, gliding down to his lower back and then his buttocks. She pressed herself against him, then began to slide down, while looking up into his eyes. She wanted to catch it immediately if she might do something he didn't like, or if she happened to do something that might disturb him so much again.

He watched her, eyes half closed, an encouraging half-smile on his lips.

She caught his rising erection between her breasts and she engulfed him in them, gently caressing him and coaxing it into a standing ovation. She finally reached a kneeling position before him and released his hindquarters so that she could grasp his member.

She shivered a little remembering when she'd been in this position the last time. It had been her sophomore year, but she'd been going out with a boy a year older than her and went with him to his junior prom. He'd wanted her to do this for him, but she'd been intimidated and practically fled the scene. She'd been so embarrassed by the whole thing but in the end it didn't matter anyway. Things at home had taken a bad turn and she'd run away soon after.

She was older now, she told herself. Not really more experienced, but at least more mature. She found she could look at it as a challenge, something to learn, and if she listened and watched very carefully, she might learn to do it right. She brought her face close and parted her lips, then kissed her way down from the head of his erection to the very base of the stem. Then she ran her tongue slowly up it, pausing to play at the very tip of him. She paused, looking up into his eyes to see how he approved just before she would take him in her mouth.

Before she did, and on impulse she tapped into her magic just a little bit, something to help her understand what had gone wrong. She looked into his eyes and read what fear was currently at the forefront of Remy's mind.

Remy's knees started to buckle but he tensed his legs to stay upright as Mizuko realized the fear uppermost of his mind was losing control again.

"Remy," she voiced quietly. *"I'm not going to do anything you don't want me to. If I go to far or too fast, stop me."* She still thought that Remy's sudden panic and freak-out was something she did but was determined not to let whatever it was happen again.

His response was to take a fistful of her hair and move her mouth back to him with a slight thrust of his hips.

Right, she thought. Distracting voice. Surprise registered dimly in her mind over his unvoiced demand, but she ignored that. She took him in her mouth, and swirled her tongue over and around all of him she could reach, spending extra time to lick his head and suck on him before enveloping him in her mouth again. She tried to be very, very careful of her teeth, using her lips only to grip and kiss.

"Use your hands too." His words were more request than order, and it was obvious to her he was enjoying her ministrations.

She did. She grasped his testicles firmly with one hand while she continued her attention, and stroked him with her other hand, then looked up to watch his reactions until she had her grip on him right.

There was no mistaking the pleasure on his face, or the slight thrust of his hips in time to the movement of her hand. He sighed, and loosened his grip on her hair, though kept his fingers tangled in her locks.

She changed her pattern, but kept up the rhythm by taking him as deep as she could and drawing back while sucking on him hard, then lingering just a moment at the head before letting him plunge deeply.

Remy let loose a guttural groan, and his fingers moved to press against the back of her head, preventing her from withdrawing too far. His hips moved in time with her mouth, thrusting harder, and she sensed the tension slowly mounting in him. Pleased at his reaction, Mizuko continued, now squeezing and releasing his testicles slightly and moving the hand gripping his erection faster between the long, deep strokes.

He fought to prolong the pleasure, but the rapidly building pressure could not be stopped. "I'm close," he ground out, wanting to give her a chance to make her choice before he exploded. She drew back one last, long time, feeling him beginning jerk and jump, then released him from her mouth. Then she caught him between her warm breasts to let him finish surrounded by her.

He grunted, pumped his hips twice more before he came, covering her skin with white sticky fluid. He remained still as his member jerked and twitched until he was spent. She held him until he was done, then lightly kissed the head of his slowly diminishing penis.

He chuckled and gave her head a slight pat. "I'll be right back." He withdrew to the bathroom, where she heard water running. A moment later he returned with a washcloth in one hand and a towel in another.

Remy knelt before her and pressed the warm damp cloth to her skin and cleaned up the mess he'd made. The cloth was followed by the towel, gently drying her skin.

When he was finished, her lips curled in a small smile and she made the sign for "Thank you." She couldn't help but wonder if he was finished for the night or if there might be a chance they could pick up where they left off before... that "something" had happened.

He quickly cleaned himself up and after returning the towel and cloth to the bathroom, knelt with one knee on the bed and held out his hand in invitation. It took almost more restraint than she had not to run to the bed. The night had already shown her so many things, good things and frightening, embarrassing things and pleasures of the flesh, but she didn't want it to end. In a few quick paces, she joined him there.

He pulled the covers over them and settled behind her, spooning her body. His arms wrapped around her and held her close, while his hands idly stroked and caressed her. "You were... amazing," he breathed, the warmth of his breath stirring the hair around her ear.

She snuggled next to him, trying to touch as much of his skin as she could. She was still a moment, then shook her head.

"What do you mean, no?" His hands stilled.

She twisted around and then sat up and signed. "I could have done better tonight. I am glad you enjoyed the BJ, but it was just ... You needed more than that. You've treated me better than anyone has in terms of sex. I wanted to be a treat for you, too."

"No one has treated you better?" Remy shook his head and stroked her face. "That is a true crime. And who said it had not been a treat for me, for I have enjoyed every moment of our time together."

Mizuko smiled sadly. "Remy, I told you I was just a runaway who was later kidnapped. It is the truth. Life was difficult then. Since then I've been touched by no one. Except for the... mishap, everything we did was perfect. I loved it. I want more."

He sighed and rolled onto his back. "Then you will have to do all the work, because I'm tired." He closed his eyes, but after a moment, cracked one open to peek at her.

She was almost unbearably cute sitting there looking him up and down trying to puzzle that out while nibbling at her thumb. He hadn't said he didn't want to have sex anymore. Just that she would have to do all the work. As he surreptitiously watched, she peeked under the covers at him to see if he was erect. He wasn't, so she crept slowly under the covers like an overly cautious cat on the prowl.

She began to play with him, teasing with her fingers. Eventually she realized he was sensitive in the furrow where his leg met his torso and she began to kiss him there. His reaction was to let out loud, fake snore. She nipped at the sensitive spot to make sure he was paying attention. His hip jerked, and he aimed a playful swat, deliberately missing her head.

Since mere play wasn't achieving her goal, she took his yet-flaccid member in her mouth again and worked at tantalizing and teasing him again, hoping to feel him almost magically rise.

His hips lifted again, urging her on before resting on the bed again. Encouraged, she moved to a more comfortable position straddling his chest and crouching over him. She took hold of him again with her hands the way she'd learned he liked it and more vigorously licked along his shaft and sucked at the head of his penis.

He remained still for a while, letting her work, though as he thickened, she felt a hand stroke her back. She arched into his fingers, but didn't stop. As he widened in her mouth, she was able to lengthen her approach, paying attention to each little shudder and jump she found as she worked and returning to those spots again and again.

Remy continued to trail his fingers over her back as she pleased him. The more engrossed she became in her actions, the lower his touch went. He knew it would take quite a bit of effort for him to climax again so soon, so he had time.

Defly his fingers played with her, gently teasing, never enough to truly distract her. He timed the movement of his hands to her pumping and sucking, and soon Mizuko was rocking her hips in in a satisfying rhythm. Each time he slid a finger into her, he spread her moisture from front to back, getting everything wet and glistening, coaxing her to raise her ass into the air to give him better access.

When Remy was finally rock hard - and Mizuko was unconsciously making whimpering noises, he teased her g-spot long enough to make her whine and tremble. He curled his finger slightly as he withdrew it, bringing with it a large amount of her natural lube. He trailed his knuckle over the now hypersensitive skin to tease around her anus, watching it pucker as she moved her hips at the sensation. He continued to play with her, now lifting his hips to thrust upwards and deeper into her throat, forcing her to rock backwards to better take him in. After four ever stronger thrusts he forced her back, a fingertip flirting with her rear entrance until the fifth and hardest thrust, when he slipped the that slick finger inside up to the first knuckle.

She moaned with delight and choked a little in surprise. She felt surrounded by pleasure, her whole world filled with sensation. She took a moment to recover, then let him slip free of her mouth as she prepared to turn around. Before she could, he withdrew his finger the pushed it deeper inside. She froze and grunted and gasped.

He continued to work her, getting one finger in as deep as it could go, then adding a second, then a third, all the while playing with her, keeping her arousal and a heightened, almost painful level, but never letting her achieve release. Eventually, both of his hands were inside her, filling and stretching her, preparing her for him. "So," he rasped. "Where do you want me most?"

She was breathing hard, her ass felt like it was on fire with pleasure and pain both. It wasn't an entry she'd planned or even thought about and that irritating little voice at the back of her mind told her she'd probably regret it later. Shut up, she told that voice. I'm ready now, and might not be again, so just shut up. Out loud,

she tried to tell him but she could only squeak out a little whimper.

Remy made the decision for her. He turned her around and slid deep into her molten core, but did not let her move. He held her there until her body quieted then helped her ride him. Every movement he controlled, forcing her to follow his pace. Slowly she edged back toward her pleasure breaking point. Only half aware of what was going on around her, so focused was she on what was happening, she didn't register the sound of a flip top cap opening.

Deep measured strokes sent her higher and higher until she screamed out in pleasure and her entire body shook. At that very moment, he shoved her roughly off him, flipped her over and pulled her half off the bed so only the upper half of her body was supported. He was gone for a moment, then spread her legs, took her rear in both his hands and surged roughly into that final virgin passage with a groan of pure, animalistic pleasure.

She matched his groan with a scream of her own, even as he tore into her. It hurt and it was also so good at the same time. She tried to move into him, taking him all but the leverage she had wasn't sufficient. She planted her hands on the bed and pushed up.

Remy only let her rise up so far before grabbing her hips and helping her move. Soon his fingers were digging into her painfully as they pounded against each other. Soon, he was panting and grunting like some animal in heat. He moved her harder and faster, angling her so each thrust gave them both the maximum amount of pleasure. Absently, she could sense his body tensing, followed by a rapid-fire series of thrust before he spilled into her. Then, in an almost absent afterthought, he reached around and touched her, giving her release even as he let her fall discarded to the floor.

She panted, shivered and she came alone on the cold floor, her body seizing and releasing. In a minute though, she began to hurt, both from the inside and from the where he'd gripped her. A quick look showed her she was probably going to have some bruises. These things bothered her, but not as much as finding herself on the floor. She looked up at him, confusion on her face.

He stood there, staring at her for a moment, then turned and walked into the bathroom.

She stared after him. She needed to clean up but moving right now wasn't a good idea. She needed a few moments to compose and collect herself and to make sure she wasn't going to leak when she stood up.

Water started running in the bathroom and the door closed.

When she thought she could make the quick trip to the bathroom, she went to the door and tried the door. Her ass burned from what they'd done together and she felt like she needed the stool as soon as possible. The door opened, but she stopped before she opened more than a crack. "*May I come in, please?*"

The rushing of water in the shower was the only answer she received. She went inside (assuming he's already in the shower?) and took care of herself. When she finished, she looked into the frosted glass to see Remy's cloudy form. She wanted to be clean, to get the sweat and scent of their sex off her, but she was a little afraid of him. He was strong, she knew, and could hurt her.

Well, she was strong, too. She lifted her chin and opened the door, stepping inside quickly.

Remy started at Mizuko's sudden appearance, and a friendly smile curved his lips. "Wanting to save water, are we?" He picked up a mesh puff and proceeded to squirt some shower gel onto it.

She flashed him a mute smile. He confused her. Leaving her to finish on the floor like he did was shocking. He knew her body, it seemed, better than she'd known herself and had made her perform for him like a musician might make an instrument produce beautiful music. Was he callous or kind? Both, it seemed.

She made to take the mesh, and sent him a questioning look, offering to clean him. He shook his head. "I made the mess, I'll help clean it up."

She nodded and lowered her hands, watching him with curiosity. When she was in water, she often took control of it to clean herself. She loved the feel of it over her body, imagining all the discomforts of life lifting and being carried away with the stream or current. She held off, even though as she closed her eyes, she could hear the whispering water asking her to guide it, to let it caress her and clean her before she let it fall through the drain. Fighting the temptation made her dizzy, though and she put her hands against the shower walls to brace herself.

"Are you alright?" Remy's voice was full of concern.

She opened her eyes and blinked away the water that fell in them. "I hurt a little, but I will be perfectly fine after I find a bite to eat," she assured him in quickly gestured sign language. "Why do you ask?"

"For a moment, you looked like you were going to faint."

She nodded slowly while looking away, as if to say "oh, that". "I'm fine," she signed. She moved closer to him, peering into his eyes. "Are you okay, too, Remy?"

He nodded. "Just tired," he replied. "It's getting pretty close to dawn."

The night seemed to have slipped by so fast to Mizuko. She smiled and nodded, then let him continue. She thought back on the evening, wondering where the time had gone. Had she fallen asleep for a while on the floor after they'd finished? How much time had passed after he'd retreated to the bathroom after the incident? She must have fallen asleep then.

As Mizuko thought, Remy washed all traces of their activities away, save for one. He bent his head and kissed the damaged flesh, but discovered it had been too long, and he could not heal the puncture wounds away.

That could be a problem, as he remembered Mizuko's friend.

Mizuko touched the wound. It stung when she did that. Any magic she'd used to bolster her stamina had vanished hours ago; that's why what they'd done later had hurt. She saw the worry in Remy's face and put her hands on his chest for a moment to assure him. Then she signed, "It is okay, Remy. It's nothing."

"Let's hope your friend Rey agrees." Finished with their shower, he reached behind Mizuko and turned off the water.

She caught his arm and stared. She remembered suddenly Rey had specifically told her he was a vampire. She also remembered she'd thought Rey was making a bad joke. But she had been bitten in the neck. There had been blood and his reaction — she wasn't human. She knew she wasn't really human but he hadn't.

Her head grew light, like it was going to float away and she blinked rapidly. He was a vampire. Rey had told her so. She looked him in the eyes and so many questions soared up from the depths of her mind she thought she'd drown in them before she could ask them all.

Mizuko knew they didn't have time for this. She blinked again and realized he was asking again if she was all right. She let go of his arm and then signed. "No one will see. The mark will be gone by morning; I will see to it, Remy. No one will know."

Suddenly she slapped him. It was not hard, and there wasn't much feeling behind it. "That was for dropping

*me and letting me lay on the floor after you finished without me.*" Then she grabbed onto him and lifted herself up to kiss him fiercely, hungrily on the lips. *"That is for everything else."*

"So this is what you do to men who give you what you ask for?" he asked, before capturing her mouth for another kiss. He broke it before she'd gotten any kind of satisfaction then smiled at her. "Take your time and make sure your hair is dried completely before you come out again." And with that, he stepped out of the bathroom and closed the door behind him.

She looked at the door for a moment, then made a snap decision. She hurried to the door and opened it quickly. *"Thank you, Remy,"* she told him. He was faced away from her. She told him the street address Rey's hookers worked and at which she usually worked as well, watching carefully over them. *"Most nights I can be found near there."*

He nodded, almost absently, pulled on a robe and walked barefoot out the door with his clothes tucked under his arm and disappeared from sight.

Mizuko didn't bother with drying her hair or the rest of her for that matter. She liked the sensation of cooling and dampness that caused goosebumps to rise on most people. But not her. She was calm and had found an element of peace she hadn't had at the start of the evening.

She returned to the bathroom and looked in the mirror. The fae-Mizuko there signed at her and she replied, *"I know. I will."* She breathed on the mirror to fog it over, then wrote the address of the building Rey's prostitutes used. She smiled. He might not see it right away, but if he forgot, then he will be reminded the next time he used this place. It felt right.

She found her clothes and shoes and put them on, then stepped out into the cold morning air.

"Well, that can be a big advantage for you, then. Not so much for her. The first ones pretty girls attract aren't going to be the nice boys, you know. They're going to be the ones looking at her tits and her ass thinking what they can do to her, you know? She's lucky she has a boyfriend, honestly.

"The way I see it, if you are standing there next to her, it's like protection. She screens off the nasties and you get the cream of the crop." He grinned at her again. "Right?"

"So if her boyfriend weren't there, would you have been trying to see if what you could do to it?" Even as the words came out of her mouth, she knew she probably would regret the answer, given how frank he was being. Did she really want to know the answer? Or was he just shoveling shit with that mouth of his? Rey batted aside the images of just what that mouth could be doing to her later.

He stopped walking and looked at her. "Now Rey, I don't believe I can answer that question to your satisfaction. If I say no, you'll think I'm lying. If I say yes, then you'll be rightly upset. So I'm not gonna answer that." He watched her to see if she was going to push or leave it alone.

"I don't think you'd lie to me."

"All right. Let me put it this way, because your question isn't so simple. Without knowing you or her, and if she were available, then I would have approached the both of you, had I not been already intimidated by how good you both looked. I'd have flirted with both of you to see who might be interested. But now I know you just a little bit, and I know she's got a boyfriend, I'd approach just you."

He scratched his head in confusion. "Or maybe neither of you, actually. Wasn't it you that approached me?"

Or ..."

"Well, if silently admiring your well muscled ass from afar was approaching you, I guess I did," Rey said with a slight smile. "But you're the one who asked to buy me a drink."

"Yep, I did at that. But I noticed you lookin'." He smiled again. "So it was a cheat. I figured I already had an 'in' with you. Which brings us to the natural question, why were you interested in me? There were handsomer guys in there, I'm sure."

"I've seen more than my share of handsome men," Rey replied. "Most of them, their beauty hides something ugly inside. Why you? Because my eyes were drawn to you first, and you were the first one to approach me." She believed the honesty he'd showed deserved honesty in return. "I'm tired of being the one to make the first move. I was content to spend an evening out with friends, watch them have their fun, maybe flirt a bit, then go home alone."

"Then you pounce the instant I'm alone with that oh so obvious pick up line. I discover you're fun to talk to, and I'm having a lot better time than I thought I was going to. I don't normally go off with complete strangers, but..." She hesitated. "I know this might sound strange, but do you know a guy by the name of Chaska, and his girlfriend, Lyla?" She tried not to hold her breath waiting for his answer.

Hot anger flashed in his eyes for a second before he drew it back inside and hid it away. He kept his voice easy and lied, "Nope." Rey knew he was lying because he wouldn't look her in the eye. He turned away from her so they could continue walking. She could see the pulse of muscles at his temple as he clenched his jaw.

Rey slowed her pace. "If you don't know them," she said carefully, "why are you so angry when I mention their names?" A horrible feeling started to writhe into her stomach, and she began to wonder if she might have made a horrible mistake.

He eyed her out of the corner of his eye, then sighed and stopped again. "How well do you know those folks?"

"Well enough," Rey replied, and fear began to flutter lightly in her. "I know who and what they are." She was unwilling to say more, to say exactly how well. "I certainly don't know them well enough to read their minds."

He looked at her for a long, drawn out moment. Then he smiled again. "So I guess that means you know them pretty well. Okay. I've heard of 'em. I've been meaning to come around and make my acquaintance in fact, but they aren't easy people to find."

"Why do you want to meet them?"

"If you know them, then you'll also know that this isn't the sort of conversation a person can have just out here on the street where anybody might listen," he replied. He glanced off the sidewalk to the left. There was an alley there and the closest street light had just winked out to save power. The shadows were deep and the darkest places held dumpsters, an old, beat up car, and a stack of wood.

"I don't think so, Chase. I have a good idea of what you might be capable of, and I feel safer knowing you're less likely to try and do something out here in public. Unless... Are you willing to swear to me you do me no harm while we're talking or immediately thereafter, and if you do, you'll suffer more than a pound of flesh?"

"What?" He looked perplexed by the odd promise. "Rey, unless you've been deceiving me in some way, I wouldn't mean you harm."

"Let's just say I know about the two different... factions of your people," she said. "I can't tell which one you belong to, so I'm just trying to be safe. That promise would go a long way to easing my concerns, and make me more likely to agree to arranging a meeting with them."

"I'm not a member of any 'faction'. Promises can be broken. You might ask yourself if you were willing to go dancing with me and maybe a ride later, then why wouldn't you be willing to take a conversation off the street? If you know those two, then you should know that talking about them can get ya killed."

"Because I believed," Rey said, her soft and barely loud enough to carry past them perhaps a bit naively, Santa Fe to be safer than most places when it comes to people like them. Mentioning their names to someone who might otherwise have no idea who they were was a risk I was willing to take. If you didn't know them, then that would have been the end of the conversation. But when you got so angry, I wondered if I'd made a big mistake. That I'd misread what kind of person you were." Rey looked Chase in the eye, but not with any kind of challenge, and took a step closer, her heart racing but unwilling to give in to her fear just yet. "And I'm wondering if I have made the biggest possible fool of myself."

Chase looked around to see who might be watching, but most of the few who were still out this late were minding their own business. He took hold of her arm and drew her close so that he could whisper in her ear. "Just hold on. There are things in this territory that listen for certain words and phrases, and report them to certain people. Things you can't see and that might not even be there until, uh, awakened. Those two you mentioned have a lot of power in that area. I do *not* want to be caught spilling ... anything out here."

Rey pulled her head back to give him a lazy, seductive smile. "I get it," she whispered and kissed him, giving those mortals who might be watching a little something to see.

He blinked in surprise but he didn't jerk away from the kiss. He let go of her arm, however. "If you've a mind to, we could just go on and have that dance and talk later. Or," he pointed with his chin back the way they'd come, "we could go for a ride and find us a quiet place we'd both be comfortable and have that talk. Unless you're just not in the mood anymore."

"I'm a flirt," Rey said softly as she took his hand in hers. "But I'm not a tease. It was for show, to give those two guys at the corner something to look at," her eyes flicked to the men in question down the street, "but it was also an invitation, if you liked it." Her smile turned a little cheeky. "And if it met with your requirements."

His smile returned to light up his face. "I like," he told her. He looked toward the dance club and then back in the direction of his bike. "Any preference? I don't know if this is a selling point, but my bike is a lot like a three hundred pound vibrator. Crude, I know, but chicks dig it."

Rey couldn't but chuckle. "Now why would I want a vibrator when I've got an extra-warm body with, I hope, a fertile imagination right here in front of me." Talk of warmth made Rey realize she was getting cold, and the ride would only make her colder. Suppressing a shiver, she continued, "though maybe getting warmed up in the club wouldn't be such a bad idea. That bike seat of yours is going to be mighty chilly, now that I think of it, as what I'm wearing under this skirt doesn't cover a heck of a lot."

He offered her an arm and they headed that direction. When they arrived at Sirea, there were a number of small groups gathered outside, and four obvious entrances. The main one was emblazoned with the club's name, and the largest number of people seemed to be moving toward that doorway. The awning over the door furthest to the left was decorated with a tasteful southwestern theme, and the one immediately to the right of it gave every indication it was the entrance to the "modern" dance floor. The final awning was bore images of various styles of dancing, from ballroom to line dancing.

"Which would do you want to try?" Rey asked Chase. "Who knows what will be on the mystery floor." She shimmied her hips slightly and said "I have to admit I'm in the mood to try the Latin dance floor. After all, we

synchronize real well."

Before he could answer, a guy dressed all in leather stepped up close behind Rey. "Hey, babe. Why don't you leave that loser and come dancing with me. I could teach you all the right moves."

"Hey man. Call me a loser again," Chase said.

"Loo-"

Chase smashed his fist into the guys mouth. He threw his weight into it, but the man was quick and managed to turn so that the tooth-crushing force glanced and split his lip instead.

Rey stood there for a moment, startled at the sudden violence, but also a bit amused. That was, until the leather clad idiot's friends saw what was going on and took exception to it. They came running and formed a semicircle behind him.

The idiot wiped his lip with the back of his fist, then smiled what he thought looked like a scary grin (but looked more like he was a constipated toad). "Is that all you've got, loser?"

"Well, there's always this." He aimed another punch at the guy's gut. The guy gave out a whoof and doubled over slightly.

One of his buddies called out "Hey, you better run. Do you have any idea who you're messing with?" Another said "Yeah, just leave the chica with us. We'll take good care of her. Show her a real good time." He made a crude gesture in Rey's direction, to which she just rolled her eyes and turned her attention back to Chase.

The guy who gestured at Rey swore, and came after her, while the other four joined their leader in attempting to beat down Chase. Chase shifted to stand between the man coming after Rey, though it made him more vulnerable to the others. They guy tossed a pretty good punch but Chase caught most of it on his shoulder. His buddies didn't get close enough to do any good for a moment, so the bounty hunter laid into Rey's antagonist.

Rey tried not to roll her eyes again, and took a few steps back from the fight so she wouldn't accidentally get knocked over. She heard some shouting nearby, announcing the fight, and someone suggesting they call the cops. "Hurry up, sweetheart," she called out. "We're going to have company soon, and I'm getting cold."

"What are you doing?" a woman nearby nearly shrieked. "They're going to kill him!"

Rey snorted. "He can take care of himself."

The group of them managed to put some hurt on Chase in the next few moments while their ring leader continued to try to get around him. He grunted and shook off the pain, then lay into the man so determined to grab Rey. This time he slammed a couple fists into the back of the guy's head and made him see stars. The leather-clad fool dropped like a sack of rocks. Chase faced the rest of the group defiantly.

"How can you say that?" The woman continued to berate Rey.

"Oh, hush," Rey replied, getting annoyed. "One down, five to go. Shouldn't take too much longer." She glanced down the street, keeping an eye out for approaching police cars.

Kicks and punches rained down from the the remaining men. Chase took his medicine, then delivered a round of his own, knocking around one of the group.

"Fuck, man, look at him fight." A young man, probably barely old enough to shave, said in awe. Rey turned her head to look at him and he held up his hands placatingly "Hey, I don't want any trouble. You're off-limits and I don't want any piece of that."

Rey dismissed him and turned away, though she didn't completely forget he was there while she watched the fight continue. The men were trying to circle Chase now, and she knew better than to say anything that would distract him.

Someone bashed him with a chair that must have been in a nearby car and few got some licks in when Chase staggered. Five to one was bad odds even for a werewolf, but his reputation was on the line, so Chase picked a different target and when the man came at him, slammed his forearm into the man's throat. He hit the ground pretty hard and lay gasping, trying to reopen his airways.

Rey stood there, watching with a little smile curving her lips. The growing crowd murmured and muttered, with shouts supporting both sides. "Look at her!" the harpy shrieked. "She's actually enjoying watching that neanderthal fighting!"

Rey turned and took closed the distance between them and leaned in close to whisper in the woman's ear "if you don't shut the hell up, you'll have more than just your panties in a twist." The woman gasped and looked at her in horror, and Rey enjoyed the wisp of fear that came from her.

Someone picked up the broken chair and swung the jagged wreck at Chase again. He caught most of it on his forearms, then reacted with a kick but his opponent dodged away.

Sirens could now be heard in the distance, and the crowd started to disperse. The ruffians picked up their buddies and moved off. "This isn't finished," the leader with the split lip swore. "Not by a long shot."

Rey watched them move off and, ignoring the other people around them, walked over to Chase. Though she said nothing, the little smile was back, curving her full, luscious lips.

Chase glanced in the direction of the retreating antagonists to make sure they weren't sneaking back around for a sucker punch and then, satisfied they weren't, turned his face back toward Rey. "The dancing was fun," he quipped. "But I think I got more warmed up than you did."

"That's her, Sonny, that's her!" Rey rolled her eyes at the screech of the harpy. "She threatened me! Do something!" Behind Rey Chase could see a distraught but furious women wearing clothes that probably would have looked better on a hooker than on her.

"Let's go, Elaine." The man took her arm and tried to lead her away, but she shrugged him off.

"No. I want her arrested!"

"Elaine, you're not even supposed to be here. Give it a rest." Sonny pulled a protesting Elaine away. Rey paid them little more than a passing glance.

"Ah, well," Rey said, "we can't have everything." The smile never left her lips; if anything it got a bit broader, and a bit mischievous. "Looks like I won't be doing much dancing." She glanced back at the building. "Not here, anyway. Why don't we head back to your bike and find that quiet place you were talking about. She reached out and wiped away a small smear of blood on his cheek. "Too bad those bruises are going to disappear soon. I think I'd have loved kissing them all better."

He chuckled. "Well they sort of hurt my feelings. I think kissing the boobos might make me feel a whole lot better."

"You'll have to remember where they hit you, then," Rey said, "to make sure I get them all." She glanced over her shoulder and in the distance could see flashing lights. "We'd better get going." Rather than slide her arm through his, she twined it around his waist and moved in close. "Any suggestions for me keeping warm on the bike, or are you prepared to help me warm up all my parts once we get where we're going?"

"I'm an excellent wind block. Plus I know just the thing to warm you up." He put his arm around her waist as well and gave her a friendly squeeze.

Mizuko found it damned difficult to walk without irritating pain that shot through her derrière, plus the bruises over her hips and thighs were really sore now, too, making her regret the tight-fitting clothes she wore. Still, she smiled to herself. Had it been worth it? She thought so.

She limped in the direction of Club Corazón's parking lot. She found Rey's car sitting in a row by itself. Morning mist had left the car damp, but she found a piece of paper and the stub of a pencil under a windshield wiper. The note asked her to wait at the car or find a way home if she wanted to, but to leave a note if she did. Mizuko tried to write on the paper, but it tore easily since it was soaked in the morning dew.

Figures.

She then tried the door handle, but the car was locked and she didn't have a key. She looked around outside the car but there wasn't anything handy she could use, so she drew on the dewy windshield, "Went home. - M" She looked back at it critically. The water ran and smeared the letters, making it barely legible. Then she had a better idea. She could just text Rey, but when she reached for her purse, she realized she didn't bring it.

Then she had to go looking for a public phone so she could call a cab. It wasn't easy; with cell phones being so common, phone booths were out of vogue. She had to walk a mile teetering on those heeled shoes, looking like she was doing the walk of shame and worried that someone was going to see the bite marks at the nape of her neck and ask questions. She kept trying to cover it with her hand, but felt like that only looked more suspicious. She swore to herself a lot. Eventually she did find a phone and called a cab — from a call station in front of a police station.

It was very early morning, so there weren't many people yet, but cops were returning from night shifts. She kept a hand clamped over the marks on her neck and smiled meekly at a few curious officers who stared at her with frowning faces at her outfit and awkward movements. She avoided eye contact.

It took all her cash for the week, but the cab would get her as far as her old park. He kept looking at her in the mirror and it annoyed her enough she told him to keep his eyes on the road. When they got there, she had him stop at the edge of the park. She paid him the twenty five dollars (mostly in ones) and left the cab. She stood and waited for him to be gone before she continued her slow walk toward the pond. She soon took off the high heels and enjoyed the nearly-freezing dew-covered grass that cooled her feet and ignored the early-morning joggers.

The sun glared into her eyes over the trees by the time she arrived at the western edge of the pond and she was feeling thoroughly exhausted and more than a little crabby. She didn't bother to change out of her clothes as she slowly walked into the cold waters. It quickly numbed her skin and soothed the burning she felt around her rectum. She let the air out of her lungs in a long, bubbling sigh as she made her way into deep water, then slowly swam to the deep, dark bottom of the pond. She moved the stones secreted there and slipped through the small vortex.

And then she was in the crystal clear spring of the motley's hollow. She swam to the surface and was quickly spotted by her pet otter, who chittered excitedly and dove in to greet her. She took some time to play with him, but she was very tired and cut things short. By the time she clambered stiffly out of the pool and crouched awkwardly at the spring's edge, she found Auriel was fluttering nearby watching Mizuko curiously.

"You're hurt again," Auriel stated.

"*I'm fine*," Mizuko said with a scowl.

"You look like you are going to fall over and you have holes in your neck. Why don't you come sit at the table. Rover finished sanding it last night and putting on something that made it smooth. It's dry and you look like you need to sit down. I'll bring you something to eat."

Mizuko winced at the idea of sitting. "*Just something to eat*," she told the sprite.

Auriel bobbed and took off in the direction of the small garden that was planted on mini terraces along the slope of one side of the steep wall of the depression. While she was away, Mizuko stretched her back, hands on her hips. When Auriel came back, she had several leaves, fruits and one white, twisted root in hand. She gave them all to Mizuko.

After she ate, the nymph shed the rest of her clothes, but again left the necklaces on because she was afraid she'd forget where she put them. She told the sprite, "I'm going to rest. Do not allow anything to disturb me unless the Hollow is threatened or the life of a member of the motley is in danger." The sprite just looked back at her curiously and shrugged. Mizuko let herself drift out into the pond and then slowly sink, breathing air for the last time until she woke from her rest.

—

When she woke, the sun was high in the sky and she was breathing air again. Her body must have floated to the surface, maybe by floating over where the spring waters shot upward from the ground. She blinked at the glaring light and squinted her eyes. A shadow fell across her.

"You look better," Auriel told her. "The bite is gone."

Mizuko scowled at her. "*I don't want you to talk about any bite I may or may not have had*."

The sprite gave her a little shrug again. "She was looking for you."

"Rey?" Auriel nodded.

"But she said her life was not in danger when I asked so I couldn't say where you might be. She was unhappy with me."

Mizuko sighed, but didn't answer. She needed fresh clothes and eventually would want to find some glamour-infused goblin fruits to reenergize herself. But for now it was more important to attend to more immediate needs. After she reached the edge of the pool, she rose and picked her way to the Door that led to Rey's home. She grimaced as she was still sore, but the bruises on her hips had faded rapidly due to the influence of the goblin fruit Auriel had provided. She wondered with brief irritation why it was that the more humiliating of the pains had to be the last to go. She shook her head and went through the Door.

The Harley rolled through the cool night air with effortless power and grace. Although the ride had only been a few minutes, they'd covered over a mile through Santa Fe and climbed part way up a mountain dotted with little pseudo-pueblo styled homes. His was tiny and, he'd told her on the way, a rental. But it was out of the way and that's what he liked when he got done with a hard day chasing down bounties and handing them to cops.

They climbed off the bike together (and Rey had to admit he was right about the 300-lb vibrator joke he'd made earlier) and stepped onto the cement drive that ended in front of a one-car garage. He didn't put the bike inside since he liked to use that space for storage. When he led her to the door, she got a glimpse of an above-ground pool about four feet tall that stood in the back yard.

Her body humming with the tension of unfulfilled pleasure, she followed him. "Is the pool heated?" she asked.

"Naw, sorry hon," he said. "I've been meaning to drain that and take it down. I sure wish I could heat it. But it's much warmer in the house anyway." He pulled keys out of his pocket and unlocked the door, flipped a switch and then held the door for her.

"Seeing the pool reminded me how much I enjoy skinny dipping." She smiled as she walked into the house and looked around. The place was simple. It had a modest living room with a couch and an old TV with an HD converter box sitting on top of it. There was a fireplace, too, with a stack of wood set nearby. A bar partitioned the kitchen from the living room and there were just two, mismatched stools keeping it company. The kitchen was likewise small but function with the basic appliances, including refrigerator, oven, sink, and even a very small, roll-away dish washer. Next to the kitchen were two doors, both closed. Presumably, one led to a bedroom and another to a bathroom, since there couldn't be much house left.

"You do like a bit of adventure," he remarked with a lopsided grin.

She held up thumb and index finger and placed them just about a hairs-width apart. "Just a little bit," she replied with a grin. "A little fear and excitement is good for the soul. Reminds you you're alive, and makes you thankful for what you have." Rey looked around, taking in everything that was there, and that which wasn't. "I like fireplaces too, but my place doesn't have one. The previous owners had it removed when the flue cracked and they had a chimney fire."

He looked at her again now in the much brighter light of his unshaded incandescent bulbs. He didn't say anything about the scars he saw on her abdomen and thigh — many women were embarrassed if attention was drawn to them, but he also noticed a tattoo in the shape of what appeared to be a wolf's paw on her back when she turned to look around.

"Rey?" he said quietly. "Are you wolfblood?"

"No," she replied, and then turned to face him. "I ran with a pack out east for a few years. I fell in love with their ritual leader and by my own choice, I had his pawprint tattooed on my back. It brought me comfort knowing that that part of him was with me when he had to leave." She continued to speak, and tried to do so without bitterness. "He's the jerk ex. He chose to turn his back on me because he couldn't handle it when I lost my magic and became something else." Rey turned to look out the window into the darkness.

He joined her, and pulled her near. For someone she just met that night, it was a forward, familiar gesture but he thought she needed the contact and trusted that she'd shove him away if he was pushing it.

"Hey, I'm sorry about all that. That it happened. I can see it hurt you pretty bad. And I think I understand you a little better if you spent time running with a pack. That couldn't have been easy for ah, well for someone who was human." He watched for her reaction.

She tensed for a moment, then relaxed into his arms. "It was both comforting and terrifying. Being the Omega with absolutely no chance of ever becoming more." Rey shrugged. "I was different then, happier to be a follower rather than take chances. I can't do that anymore. I won't. I think the alpha knew that when I told him I had to leave. I think he also knew, somehow, that I likely wasn't ever going to go back.

"Those wolves were everything to me. James taught me to hunt. Lyla and Rose taught me how to seduce the wolf I wanted." She shook her head. "It was hard to say goodbye." Rey was calm and accepting of what had happened; she had long since cried out her grief. Now she felt only regret at the loss of those friends she'd left behind.

"That the same Lyla you mentioned earlier?"

"Yeah." She tilted her head back so she could watch Chase's face. "Lyla and I go back a long way. Chaska too. We're good friends."

His face darkened soberly and he let his hand fall away from her waist. He just looked at her. As she began to have a realization what that meant, he hurried to say, "Rey. I told you I'm a bounty hunter." His look said he was sorry.

Rey felt an eerie calm fall over her. "If you're after one of them, let that job go, Chase. Please."

He shook his head. "It's not that simple, Rey. Actually, if I were smart I'd put you away somewhere so you couldn't warn them. But something tells me you'd gnaw your own paw off to get free."

"More than that, Chase." Her eyes dropped to the floor and she closed her eyes against the threatening tears. "If I disappeared, you'd have the entire Stormfront pack and all their allies howling for your blood," she said, her voice barely above a whisper. She didn't mention her other friends, her motley. They'd find her sooner or later, but would it be in time? "Is there anything I could do, anything I can say, to get you to stop?" She lifted her eyes to look at him, not knowing if the pain she was feeling was there for him to see.

"I don't know," he said. "I don't think so. You bought them time with that little fight today. It'll take me a couple days to rebuild my strength. I won't make my move until then."

"Why do you have to do this? Is it the money?" Oh god, Rey thought, what have I found myself in. Why do I have to care so much about him, and so damned soon?

"It's a job."

"Why can't you take another bounty," she said. "Set this one aside for now."

"It's not something I can ignore," he replied.

"Why not? What's so important about this bounty anyway?" Damn him, she thought, her anger beginning to rise. Damn him and every prideful fucking werewolf in the world.

"When you take a bounty like this, you do it. Or the bounty gets put on you. It isn't about money, although the reward is decent. It's about survival. One of those two made some very powerful enemies very, very angry, Rey. They'll have their punishment meted out or they'll have my hide and send out someone else. I want to remain free, then I have to do this."

Rey swore under her breath. "Do the people who set the bounty know who Chaska and Lyla are?" His answer could help her narrow down who might have set it.

He nodded slightly. "Rey, I don't think you want to know too much more about this."

"I don't," she agreed, then took a tentative step toward him. "But," she said softly, almost too low to hear, "if I could find a way to get you free of this, so you keep your freedom if you don't fulfill the bounty, would you take it?" She knew far too well the price of one's freedom, and the desire to keep it at all costs.

He snorted. "Sure." But the look in his eyes said he didn't believe it. "Rey, you barely know me. Shouldn't you be going directly to your friends to warn them? You need to be real about this. It's them or me."

"I guess I'm living in a fantasy world," Rey replied with a sad smile, "because I want it both ways." She reached out to touch his face but stopped and let her hand fall. "I'd better go." She turned and headed for the door, half hoping he'd ask her to stay.

"Hey, Rey?" She heard a snick-snick behind her.

She stopped, still as a predator hunting, or the prey being hunted. Pausing for a moment, she summoned as much power as she could before turning back to face Chase.

His back was to her as he rummaged in a closet. One of the two closed doors hadn't been to a bath or bedroom, after all. He removed a jacket and started toward her, then stopped, catching the strained look on her face.

She let out the breath she'd been holding and waited for him to make the next move.

He continued toward her and said, "It's cold out there." He offered her the jacket. He was standing so close and looking into her eyes. He had to know something. He leaned down for a kiss.

It had been so long, she'd forgotten what it was like. She half sighed, half sobbed as she parted her lips to welcome him. He pressed in, brushed her lips with his, then came for more. He drew her to him, pressing close, as if he might drink her in.

Her hands slid up his arms to tangle fingers in his hair as she fitted herself against him, rubbing against him like a cat trying mark something with her scent. She wanted to feel his skin against hers.

Rey deepened the kiss even more, threatening to devour him whole.

He lifted her to bring her closer and took her over to the couch. Chase felt her fire and liked it. He knew it was dangerous, that the girl could go straight to his enemies and get him killed. Right now, he didn't care. Instead, he picked her up and laid her out on the couch without breaking the kiss, then followed her down, pressing into her yielding body.

Even as her legs wrapped around his waist, her hands went to his shirt, pulling at the fabric. She wanted to see his chest. To touch it. She broke their kiss and growled "I hate that shirt. It's in the way." Rey tugged the shirt out of his pants and slid her hands beneath it, blindly seeking the hard, muscular planes of his abdomen and chest.

He caught her hands with a chuckle and pulled them away. He leaned up away from her and then pulled it off and tossed it at the TV. When he leaned back down over her, he kissed her on the lips, then cheek, and worked his way down to the nape of her neck. He followed the kiss with a bite to the neck, finding the nerves that sent sparks and shivers through her. It wasn't hard enough to break the skin or bruise but yet enough to let her know who was on top.

Rey gasped and arched her back in pleasure. She wanted more. She reached around behind him and grabbed a handful of his hair and pulled on it just enough for her to reciprocate, though she had to concentrate so that her teeth wouldn't make him bleed.

He emitted a deep, rumbling growl and lowered his pelvis to rest against hers. She could feel his excitement building, stretching his pants. He pushed away from the couch with one hand then with the other he pulled at her top, first one side and then the other to get it off of her.

She arched her back again, pulling the offending garment off and sending it flying, revealing the practically sheer demi bra she wore. The black lace made her pale skin look luminous, and presented her breasts in a way she knew drove most men wild.

The couch was small and he had to drop one leg to the floor for balance as he moved down and bit at the place the cups of her bra joined. Rey saw the muscle in at his temples flex and with a snap, his teeth cut through material and underwire both. He drew back and brushed the remains aside, flashing her a boyish grin as he did.

"Shall I send you the bill for the replacement?" she teased breathlessly before pulling his head back down for another kiss. He responded by nipping at her lower lip with and flicking his tongue over them.

When he drew away he chuckled. "Knew this couch was a bad idea." He scooped her up in his arms and headed to the remaining closed door. He impatiently kicked it open, then tossed her onto his queen-size bed. He followed her down and then kissed her again while his hands caressed her breasts. His large hands handled her endowments firmly, then pinched her nipples to send spikes of prickly pleasure pulsing through her breasts and up.

A little half grunt, half moan of pleasure escaped Rey. Sliding her arms around his back, she dragged her nails along his spine. Her claws, which looked like normal if not well manicured fingernails, left faint lines on his back but did not break the skin. Around his sides and onto his chest she ran her palms firmly over his flesh, loving the feel of the crisp hair on his chest. She sought out his nipples, making them hard as tiny pebbles with her experienced fingers.

Inviting and demanding at the same time, her tongue sparred with his to see who would dominate their kiss. She refused to be passive. She needed to be active, a full partner in their pursuit of passion and satisfaction. Rey couldn't be anything else, not anymore. The years of her durance, enslaved and tormented by her Keeper, had pruned and slashed away that submissiveness. She could never go back, even if she wanted to. She reveled in the power that new found freedom gave her, and she was determined to show him what would be waiting for him if he could be freed too.

His hands worked their way down her torso, massaging as he went. The natural, burning heat of his body made his hands warm everything they touched. He released the kiss and slipped his hands under her skirt to massage her buttocks. The skin was still cold and bare. At first he didn't think she was even wearing underwear, but then his searching fingers caught the thin strings she used. The motorcycle seat had to have been very cold.

He rubbed to warm her up, then tossed the hem of her skirt up so that it was out of the way and exposed her to him. He didn't bother to take off the g-string, but simply pushed it aside, raised her up to him so to that only her upper back and head still rested on the bed and then made a long, hot trail along her furrow.

Rey's sharp intake of breath and a moan of pleasure filled the room and she couldn't help but squirm and try to press closer, scrabbling for purchase with her still stiletto-clad feet. The flash of steel caught his eye and, giving caution its due, he pause enough to reach over and flip the shoes off her feet. He then took the opportunity to drop his jeans and step out of them as well as underwear and socks.

He looked back at Rey on the bed, noting her skirt was still up above her waist and grinned mischievously before he climbed back on the bed and resumed his attention to her wet slit.

Need thrummed strongly in her, delicious discomfort spreading from her heated core to all corners of her body. Unseen to Chase, Rey's brambles writhed and vines shifted in tune with the ebb and flow of her lust. But she didn't want to go too soon. She grabbed two fistfuls of his hair and pulled him upwards until she could kiss him once more.

"My turn," she growled and kissed him deeply, tasting herself on his lips. With a quick flex of her body, they rolled and switched positions with her now on top. Rey raised her torso up through sheer muscle power to look down at him hungrily. She reached up to pull out the few pins she'd used to release her hair, letting it cascade down around her like a veil, then proceeded to her own version of what he'd done to her to him.

She grazed his skin with her teeth, stopping at places to bite him she knew from experience were sensitive on a man, using enough force make sure he felt it but good. Down his chest she roamed, pausing at each nipple to torment them before moving on. Upon reaching his navel, the bites eased, becoming more playful nips punctuated by deliberate licks. When her chin brushed against his rampant erection, she paused to look up the length of his body at his face, her waist-length hair framing it all.

He raised an eyebrow at her and made his erect member move enough to brush her lightly. She gave him a slow smile and, never breaking eye contact, ran the tip of her tongue from the tip of base of him and back again, then took him in her mouth and swallowed him down whole.

Rey slid her hands down the outside of his thighs then up the inside with a firm, passionate touch. When they reached his balls, one went to cup and massage them while she spread the other wide, curving her fingers around the stem of his shaft and lightly holding him down.

As she withdrew, always moving slowly, she teased him with her tongue while creating suction, gentle at first but getting stronger as she got close to the head. Rey released the suction as she moved down, only to repeat the process with each stroke. Her hand massaged his balls with even pressure, shifting and pressing them, heightening his pleasure.

A sighing moan signaled his approval. He let her continue for a while, but when he felt close, he reached down and pulled her off him by her shoulders. He turned over, positioning her beneath him again. "I need a moment," he told her. He spend the time treating one nipple to a teasing, tugging bath of tongue and teeth while massaging the other, then switching and the same for her other nipple.

Rey didn't try to suppress her own sounds of approval. She wasn't whimpering with need yet, but she was on the way. Twining her hands above her head with a provocative movement, she grabbed the bedsheets to keep herself from touching him. Not being able to do so, she knew, would only strengthen the experience for her.

He noticed and grinned. He grabbed both her wrists with one hand to pin them over her head, then continued working on her breast with tongue and light pressure from his teeth. His other hand trailed lightly south, however, and found her moistened lower lips. He explored with one sweep of a finger, then it dove into her, curling to find the little forward roof of her just inside.

She made a breathless little noise and lifted her hips, inviting him to explore deeper. He did. He slipped his fingers inside, pulled them back out to play with the sensitive little nub outside, then dove in again. He inserted another finger as she loosened and became ever more moistened.

The noises she made became louder, her hips moving in time to the slip and slide of his fingers. Soon, she writhed helplessly, almost uncontrollably. She needed more than just his fingers and she needed it now. "Chase." Her New Orleans accent was pronounced and control of her voice was starting to break down, and both loved and hated the fact he knew it.

Rey tugged at her hands, seeing if he'd let her go or keep her restrained. She desperately wanted to touch

him, to grab him and pull him to her, or flip their positions, force him down onto his back and ride him until they both howled. So intent she was on what she was feeling and what she wanted to do, she unknowingly murmured her intent in French.

He chuckled and refused to release her hands. He continued to play with her, bringing her to the edge and the stopping, preventing her from gaining release. He did that twice, almost cruelly preventing her from doing anything about it.

Then he brought his fingers up and touched her lips. She could smell herself on him, felt her own slick lubrication on his fingers. Still he waited to enter her.

Her eyes blazed with lust and frustration. "What are you waiting for?" she panted, her voice thick and almost a growl.

He decided that reaction was close enough to what he wanted. His aim was deftly accurate when he slid inside her. It went in smooth and not too fast. He let go of her wrists then and levered his thighs under hers, so that her legs had to lift up and apart, allowing him to go as deep as he possibly could. When the base of his shaft pressed against her, he paused long enough to let her feel him fully.

Rey gave a gasping sigh of relief and pleasure at having that desperate need filled. She opened her legs wide and lifted her knees enough to give him as much access as possible, but not so much that she might overbalance. After a moment she rolled her hips, reveling in the sensation of him filling her.

He drew out, releasing a groan of approval, found a grip on her thighs, and then rammed back inside, this time faster than the first. He adjusted to get just the angle he wanted and repeated it again, watching her body's reaction. Her back arched and her hips flexed as her inner muscles clamped down on him. He moaned with pleasure and pulled back to ready another thrust.

Rey growled, a non-Gifted version of the lust-inducing noise Lyla used with such great effect. She squirmed, trying to move closer even as her muscles clamped down again around the head of his shaft.

Now satisfied with the angle, he thrust several more times, then added a finger to the effort, tickling a spot otherwise difficult to stimulate.

She couldn't hold back another shuddering gasp and let out a moan of almost fulfilled need. Her hips rose with each thrust and it was getting hard to breathe, she was panting so hard. The pressure was building with each thrust, making her body tremble. She swore at him in French, calling him all manner of crude things for his tormenting her until suddenly the dam broke and all the pent up sensation exploded, making her scream his name. Her body shook and bucked against him, like a coiled spring finally set free. His reaction was immediate and echoed her own. His final thrust slammed home and he remained there, jerking inside her as his orgasm froze him in place.

He stayed there a long, drawn-out moment before he slowly let her thighs down and he drew over her. Wolfen eyes locked onto hers with sated warmth and he settled onto her, suddenly gentle. He held her tight to him, enveloping her in the heat of his body.

"Asshole," she said softly, the bemused but fully satisfied tone of voice belied her rude word. "Next time, let's see how you like being strung out like that." She nuzzled the side of his neck and gave him a playful nip before wrapping her arms around him to bask in the afterglow and his warmth.

"Ungh," he mumbled and kissed the edge of her ear. He squeezed her close. He was actually rather proud of himself. He hadn't lost control and bitten her, nor had he shifted on her. In all, it was a banner night, except for the problem that she'd probably get him killed tomorrow. But, he decided, that was tomorrow's problem, not tonight.

Rey remained still and relaxed in his arms, but her mind was anything but. What a quandary she found herself in. Her best friends, Lyla and Chaska, were in danger, in the form of the bounty hunter who she'd just spent the last hour or so having sex with. What was she going to do? And what did his actions now mean, the cuddling and the kiss? Her experience with werewolves was limited to just one other man, but she knew that at one time he loved her. Then Grey acted like this, cherishing her, but it ended when she'd returned and he'd discovered what had happened.

This had to be something normal for werewolves, she told herself. Just a desire for physical contact in the aftermath of some nearly mind-blowing sex. She sighed and closed her eyes, just for a moment. She'd worry about all of this tomorrow when she was back home in Mythic. Alone.

She felt a painful twisting in her gut and felt tears rise in her eyes. Damnit, she thought, and buried her head against his chest, hoping he'd never notice the tears.

Mizuko, naked but for the silver necklaces stepped into her room in Rey's house. She found some clothes, a more conservative set that Rey had helped her with that she wore when going to work at the casino. Since it was daytime — was it the weekend? was she off today? Mizuko had no idea — she normally went to the casino to watch and review things there.

Once she was presentable, she found her cell phone and noted a few messages there. One was from Honey and another from Verdant Green. Both were Spring Court changelings. She listened to the messages, then deleted them, put the phone away and stepped out of her room.

The house was quiet, though the faint sounds of classical music drifted on the air through the open door of Rey's bedroom. Mizuko approached the door, shoes tock-tocking upon the wood floor. "Rey? *Do we have any aspirin?*"

There was no response, so Mizuko poked the door open wider with a finger. Rey lay sleeping in bed, though the alarm clock read one in the afternoon. Mizuko walked over and lifted the night mask Rey used to keep the daytime sun from waking her to look at one eye. "Rey. You awake?" Rey slept nude and she was on top of the covers. Mizuko spotted a couple finger-shaped bruises on her hips and smiled. She hadn't been the only one to have an interesting night. She put the smile away quickly when Rey stirred.

"Huh?" Rey said blearily, pulling the sleeping mask off her face. Now that her eyes were open and she was trying to focus on Mizuko, her friend could see they were red, though if from lack of sleep or something else, Mizuko couldn't tell. Rey also woke pretty quickly as a rule, giving something else for thought.

Mizuko studied her for a moment. "*What's wrong, Rey?*"

Rey closed her eyes again. "Today I have to decide between protecting two people I consider family, or a man I think I may start caring deeply about and with whom I'm have had the best night of sex in over three years."

Mizuko rested a hand on Rey's for a moment. Then she signed, "Rey, please don't take this the wrong way. But have you really had sex in the past three years?"

"Believe it or not," Rey replied with a weak smile, "I have."

Mizuko nibbled her thumb and considered. "So it's not just sex," she signed. "So, why do your friends need protection? Why must you make a difficult choice?"

"Because the man I spent the night with is a bounty hunter, and he's been hired to take out my friends." Rey struggled up to a seated position. "I'm not like Simon, who'll have sex with anything female." There was no censure in her voice, it was just a statement of fact. "I have to at least like the guy. But Chase, he can't just drop the job. If he does, the guys who hired him will kill him, or worse."

"Sounds like he's an assassin and if that was all he was to you, I'd take care of him for you today. Those kinds of people aren't good to let run around threatening your friends or family. But since he does mean something to you, I have some advice. Do you want to hear it?"

"I need all the help I can get right now."

Mizuko nodded, and signed rapidly what she was thinking in Glymjack. "Okay. If someone has sent assassins — okay bounty hunters you say — after your friends, then you've got to know that after this other guy, they'll just keep sending more until your friends are dead. You taught me that, didn't you? These guys work by attacking from surprise, when the target isn't ready for them. We all have vulnerable moments, no matter how good we are. Anyone can get killed. My experience taught me that.

"What you need to do, then, is to find a way to talk your friends into protecting this guy and then getting this guy to give up the job. Then your friends will have an assassin of their own to watch their backs. It's the best protection against future assassination and just might — if you can convince all parties this is smart — keep everyone alive."

Mizuko wasn't big on the details. She just knew what her instincts told her, and she stated exactly what they were. It would be up to Rey to think it through and fill in the blanks, should she decide it was a good idea at all.

Rey nodded. Something along those lines had come to mind. Getting Chase the protection of being part of a pack, but she hadn't gone so far as to consider turning the assassin into a bodyguard or sorts. She smiled. "Excellent thinking, Mizuko. Thank you." Her smile brightened a bit. "If this works out, you may just get to meet the man who got me so hot and bothered that I started swearing. In French."

Mizuko had never heard Rey swear, not anything worse than "damn", and that only muttered very softly. In fact, Rey made a point of telling Mizuko that foul language just brought you down into the gutter with the thugs they were better than.

Mizuko cocked an eyebrow in reply. "Did he give you that?" She poked a bruise on Rey's thigh.

Rey nodded. "I like it rough," she answered simply.

Mizuko looked at Rey's face and signed, "We are like sisters." Her own face was almost devoid of expression, however. "And we need aspirin. Do we have any?"

Rey nodded and chuckled softly. She grabbed the green silk robe hanging in the back of her door and slipped in on before retrieving the pills from the bathroom. In the kitchen, she offered Mizuko the tablets for a single dose along with a glass of water.

"I called in sick to the casino, and then I need to call my friends." Rey downed her own pills. "I've got to talk to them, and it's probably a good idea if I go alone."

Mizuko took the pills and drank some water. "I can keep secrets, you know," she said, a little hurt showing on her face.

"I know," Rey said. "And I know you, but they don't. I'll ask if I can bring you, but if they say no, I have to

respect their wishes."

Mizuko nodded, then brought up a point of business. "We have two nibbles for the offer I put out last week. But neither wants to be called prostitutes. They want to be call girls and operate only by arrangements over the phone. I think it will still help business."

"Are we going to need to provide a car service for them?" Rey asked. She opened the fridge door and took the rotisserie chicken out and put it on the counter. After removing the lid, she pulled pieces of meat off the carcass and ate them. That was something else Mizuko had never seen Rey do. She almost always used utensils, unless it was a sandwich, and she never ate like this.

Mizuko frowned as she watched her friend. She sat down carefully on a stool and waited until Rey looked her way again, then signed, "I thought taxi. Maybe rental if the occasion requires. Cost to come out of their own earnings, just like the prostitutes have to pay for their own rooms. Shall I hire them?"

Rey nodded. "Go ahead." She tucked a piece of chicken breast into her mouth and chewed.

"I want to up a meeting with Dusk and Simon today. Will you be on hand to help? I'd prefer not to use my voice for this one."

"Probably. What time?" Rey continued stripping the chicken bones.

Mizuko stood up, pulled out the silverware drawer and handed Rey a fork and knife. "*If you won't let me eat like that, then you don't get to either,*" she scolded.

Rey looked at the cutlery, perplexed, then there was a look comprehension and a faint blush tinged her cheeks. "Thank you." She grabbed a paper towel and wiped her fingers. "Spending time with Chase made me revert to some of the lazy habits I had when living with the pack."

Mizuko didn't say anything but just watched her a moment more. "Sunset. Around six," she signed. "Anything else?"

"Did you have a good evening?" she asked softly, neutrally.

Mizuko turned her face to the windows over the kitchen sink and stared out. She hadn't considered or decided if the evening was good or bad. It simply had been. She'd enjoyed many of the things that happened, but other things still confused her.

Noting Mizuko's pause, Rey rephrased the question. "Did you enjoy yourself?"

She looked back at Rey. "There were many things I did enjoy. He gave me exactly what I asked him to. Next time I will understand better what it is I am asking."

Rey thought about her own bruises. "Did he hurt you when you didn't want to be hurt?"

Mizuko shook her head. "I would do it again if I saw him, I think. I don't know if that's good or bad, but I don't really care."

"Why not?"

"Because he made me feel things I hadn't felt before. Because I know he can show me other things, too. Whether they are good or bad doesn't make any difference." She thought about his small kindnesses, especially. She didn't know if he really meant them or not. As she thought about it, she decided that wasn't all that important right now. But she'd appreciated it. "He was very polite to me when I wanted him to be,

and not and I asked him not to be. Is that really both good and bad then?" Mizuko frowned. She was beginning to think she might not understand the question.

"*Oh. Dammit,*" she vocalized. *"I told him thank you at the end of the night. Morning. Whenever that was. I shouldn't have done that. I forgot."*

"Why shouldn't you have said thank you?" Rey asked, choosing to ignore the profanity this once.

Mizuko looked Rey in the eye and signed, "It is polite to do so, but expressing gratitude in those words implies indebtedness. Remy probably does not know this, but it is poor practice. We are fae; we should never forget such things, never make mistakes like that. Should we make a mistake and are deceived by one of the True Fae, they can use it against us. If Remy was a True Fae disguised, I could have made a serious error, because he would soon call in my debt."

It was something that had come up before in dealing with other fae, Rey remembered. Belle had mentioned it several times recently, but changelings, being also once human, often forgot this. The truth was, the more fae a changeling was, the more subject to fae laws they became. While some changelings, closer to humanity than not, may be unaffected by such implied promises, those who were closer to their fae heritage became bound by them. This happened as a changeling grew in power and decreased in clarity — their ability to determine what is real and what is not. In fact, even non-fae, mortals and supernaturals alike, who understood the rules the fae lived by could take advantage of it.

A wiser course of action was when expressing appreciation, to state it and not imply anything else. Autumn Witches taught their sorceresses to make statements such as "I appreciate what you did," rather than the open-ended implication of indebtedness that "Thank you" grants.

Rey thought back to when she'd seen Chase last. Had she thanked him? No. She'd bid him adieu, and gave him one last long, almost melancholy kiss before he drove away. She only hoped the next time she saw him, she'd be able to return the jacket to him alive.

Mizuko sighed. "I enjoyed my night. I don't know if I will see him again, though," she signed.

"Why?" Rey kept the idea that she thought that would be for the best to herself.

"I don't know how much he liked being with me, or if he was just too polite to toss me out." She thought about the incident that had made him scream in horror and go into some kind of fit. If that had happened to her, she wasn't sure she would have stayed around.

"Did something happen?" Rey frowned, and began thinking about how quickly she might learn what she needed to permanently destroy a vampire.

Her face paled as she thought of what happened after he bit her and she looked like she was holding back tears. "Nothing I can explain."

"Don't explain," Rey said gently, "just tell me." She reached out and took Mizuko's hand, offering comfort. The time spent with Chase made her realize exactly how much she'd missed the simple pleasures of a gentle touch or a hug. Perhaps that kind of contact might help Mizuko fight back the influence of the Hedge and regain some of her humanity.

"Things were going very well." She smiled sadly. "I was... very ready and he was too. Then somehow I scared him. I don't know how it happened. It just... did. He wasn't quite the same the rest of the night. Erratic. Polite, but... I'd scared him very badly. If it were me and I'd been so scared as badly as he had been by something he did, I'd have probably run away. He didn't. He stayed and he let me stay. Let me try to make it up to him."

She remembered standing in the mirror and feeling so guilty about it. The emotion washed over her again and she tears started to tumble down her cheeks. "Am I a horrible person? Did I make him go through more just because I selfishly wanted it to not be over? Maybe he hates me and is afraid of me now. He was really, really good at sex and good to me and polite. I make a mess of everything every time I try to be human."

Rey carefully gathered her friend into her arms to give her a shoulder to cry on, not caring if her friend's tears ruined the silk of her robe. "You can't control what happens, or how other people react. The important thing is that you are trying. Even humans aren't always good at being human." She couldn't believe she was saying this. "If he does care, he'll try to find you again. If he doesn't..." she shrugged. "Then he's simply not worth the tears you're shedding. They never are." She paused and continued. "Grey, the man I loved, hurt me badly when I managed to escape my Keeper and returned home. We'd promised each other forever, but when the chips were down, he turned his back on me because he couldn't handle the truth."

*"That's awful," Mizuko said. She gave a shuddering sigh and leaned against Rey just a little. She wiped the tears away. "I'm sorry," she said, using her quietest, voice. "I'm feeling sorry for myself as well as for what happened to Remy. In all honesty, I'm not looking for or expecting some kind of relationship. I just wanted sex, to feel human. I spent a lot of my power to look and feel as human as possible. I messed up in the middle somehow, but in the end he did make me feel like a human. A woman. I think that's why I thanked him. Because of the way he made me feel. I can't deny I'm confused by what happened last night, and my feelings about it are all mixed up. They're sometimes too strong and sometimes not there at all. I will be fine.*

*"Though my ass hurts like hell. Rey, I learned something about taking it there. You have to really want it to put up with this."* She looked dead serious when she said it, too.

"If you want just sex," Rey said, "I can hook you up with a guy that would suit you just fine." Her thoughts immediately went to Morrison. "Sex is all he's after with any woman. Good looking, and most likely has the stamina of an Olympic long distance athlete. But if you're having sex and it hurts internally, you're doing it very wrong. I'm sure we can find a shop somewhere that we can get something to help you now."

Mizuko switched back to sign. "No, I'm okay," she assured Rey. "I don't think there's something wrong inside."

"Still, there's stuff we can do for the discomfort," Rey said, "but if you say you're okay, then I'll take your word for it. And there's nothing wrong with feeling sorry for yourself once in a while. Sometimes, that's the only pity you'll ever get. The thing is not to dwell on it. Learn from your mistakes and move on." She gave Mizuko a little smile. "And believe your friends when they tell you someone is a vampire."

"I'm glad I have a friend who wouldn't leave me with a dangerous person when I might be in a vulnerable position." She hugged Rey.

Rey tried not to grimace at the reminder of what happened. Remy may not have hurt Mizuko, or perhaps Mizuko has been brainwashed to forget what happened. And while Alexei was right, she might not be able to prevent it from happening, but she sure could try to make sure he never did it to anyone else after that, ever again.

"So the meeting with the Glacial Axe is tonight," Rey said, changing the subject. "Where are we meeting them?"

"One of them," Mizuko signed, "either Richard or Claire is usually in contact with the reigning Court. I'll ask Veridia where to find one of them and we can go from there."

Rey nodded. "How should I dress? I don't know if my only piece of hedgespun clothing would be suitable for this kind of meeting."

"You'll be fine, Rey," Mizuko assured her. "We're fae people. Anything from rags to ballroom gowns goes — it all depends on how you want to represent yourself."

"First impressions affect everyone, no matter who we are," Rey replied with a smile, thinking back to the first time she'd seen Chase. She'd been right - his ass was truly spectacular.

Mizuko caught the pleased look Rey had on her face and blinked, uncertain why Rey's statement would make her so happy. She signed, "All right. Then you have until sundown to find something which you feel represents you and impresses others?"

"That shouldn't be a problem," Rey replied, finally getting her expression back to something resembling professional, which rapidly became sober. "I have to make that phone call." She looked around, trying to find the purse she'd used the previous night.

Rey found it on the floor in the hallway, where she must have dropped it while stumbling to bed shortly after dawn. She returned to the kitchen and put it on the table to search for her phone. First, she pulled out her ruined bra, followed by a little plastic baggie with the buttons that had gotten torn off her shirt. Finally finding her phone, she dialed Lyla's cell phone number from memory.