

Three days before the party Remy'd invited her to, there was a knock on the door. Mizuko was still staying with the two former prostitutes in a small, rented apartment in Santa Fe. One of them, Lea, was also working at a waitress and had managed a day shift at a family restaurant. The other, Kiera, was working at as a receptionist at a chain auto repair shop. Both were out working in the mornings, which left Mizuko a chance to sleep in from her evening shifts at Corazon's.

She blearily rose from the couch that she'd been using as a bed. Lacking night clothes (it was on her shopping list of things to ask Amber to help her with, but she hadn't seen her friend in a while), she wrapped the blanket around herself and shuffled to the door. She peeked through the peephole by raising up on her toes.

On the other side of the door was a man dressed in a uniform of sorts, one similar to the man who had been driving Remy's car. Over his arm he had a large black suit bag, and in the other he held the handle of a large bag containing several boxes.

Mizuko opened the door a crack and peeked through. When the man saw her, she smiled and held up one finger, then found her pad and paper. On one sheet she wrote, "I don't speak but I hear fine. Who is this for?" She then unchained the door and opened it, then held up the pad for the stranger to read.

"Are you Miss Naia," he asked politely with a very faint accent. She nodded. "Then these are for you, Miss. Compliments of Mr. Deprez. He asked me to inform you they are on loan to you until the 23rd, as per your agreement with him." He quickly looked at how she was dressed. "If you would be so kind as to direct me to where I should place these, I will be on my way and let you return to your rest."

Mizuko's lips twitched in amusement. She stepped back, then turned and led him into the apartment. Her own clothes, except for one very special dress that Rey had made her, were all folded in a suitcase that lay open. The dress that Rey made was on a hangar looped over the top of a partially-opened closet door. She pointed for the boxes to go next to her case, and for the suit bag to be hung on the closet door.

Mizuko returned to the entryway and jotted something down on the notepad then waited for him to put things down and prepare to leave. She held up the pad, which read, "Please express my appreciation to Mr. Deprez." When he read that, she followed it with an oddly formal curtsy given her attire, then gracefully stepped out of his way.

"Of course, Miss," he replied, and bowed in return. "Sleep well, Miss." He walked out of the apartment and disappeared down the corridor toward the elevator.

As soon as he was gone, Mizuko investigated the contents of the loaned clothing. The garment bag held a purple evening gown of a shade to match her eyes' fae mien and there was a matching shawl that went with it. The boxes held black high heels, which she tried on and experimented walking with them. She decided she would have to practice a little in the next couple days to get used to them. Long gloves were in one of the boxes, and the smallest box held a beautiful diamond necklace with a set of earrings and diamond combs to match. She didn't know what the going price was for such jewelry but she imagined they were very expensive.

She had a few ideas of how she wanted to use the combs based on what she'd seen a few people wear at Court, but wasn't confident she could make her hair look the same way. So, she decided she was up for the day and went into the bathroom to try to experiment a little. The dress had a well-hidden zipper along the side where she could reach it, which she found to be very convenient.

Over the next couple days, she checked her supply of undergarments and collected advice from her roommates. She wanted to go for comfortable, but found she had to compromise a little here and there. Ultimately, she didn't end up spending very much of her small cash reserve since she didn't really need the garments to last.

She wasn't certain what time the function would be, so she aimed to be ready about a half hour after sunset. That was fairly early in the evening this time of November, but she made the effort to have her hair right and every piece in place. She even borrowed some makeup and by an hour after sunset she was still fiddling with the very light amount of makeup she'd applied.

At precisely an hour after sunset, there was a knock on the door, a quick, precise rap that seemed to echo through the apartment. Mizuko put down the lipstick she'd open for the fifth time and made sure the shawl was placed evenly on her shoulders, then walked to the door with a measured pace. She unlatched the chain and opened the door without checking the peephole.

Remy stood there, immaculately and perfectly dressed in a silk tuxedo. "Your carriage awaits," he signed with a smile, then offered her his arm.

Kiera stuck her head around the corner of the short hallway and took a look. She grinned and waved. "Have fun you guys."

Mizuko looked back at her and waved her off with a small gesture of her hand, hidden from Remy's sight behind her leg. Kiera's pretty face disappeared again.

"Who was that," Remy whispered into Mizuko's ear.

Mizuko put her hand on his arm and whispered back, "*Roommate. She helped me with makeup. She doesn't know anything, just a mortal.*"

"Why don't you live with Miss Lafitte anymore?" Remy asked with an expression of concern. "I hope I am not to blame."

*"No, of course not. I used to work for her, but that operation was shut down. I wasn't needed and so staying with her was like charity. I wanted to see if I could get by on my own merit. After I advised the prostitutes I once defended to abandon Belle Avenue and take up a different trade, a couple of them let me stay with them. This is that place."*

Mizuko let him guide her into the hall and then she closed the door behind them. She let go of his arm and looked up at him expectantly.

He looked at her and smiled, then bent his head to press a kiss full of promise on her lips. This time magic generated from the act flowed into her. She sighed, pleased.

"If I'd known simply kissing you would have made you so happy," he teased, "I'd have done this more often." He took her hand and returned it to its place on his arm. "I'm afraid we cannot dawdle. The party begins soon, and we must be there early."

She nodded and let him lead her away.

A sleek black limousine waited for them at the curb in front of the building, looking extremely out of place in the rundown neighborhood. The driver stood next to the rear door and opened it, allowing Mizuko and Remy to enter without having to pause.

Mizuko ducked and peered inside, unsure if one crawled headfirst or butt first into these things. She opted for head first so she could see where she was going, which left her briefly in an unladylike position. She quickly realized her error when she found she could not crawl forward in the dress. She backed out of the limo, straightened her dress and ignored the amused looks she got. She then went in tail first and scooted over.

Remy joined her in the back seat, and when the chauffeur closed the door, he quickly signed "You might find it easier if you turn and sit down on the outside edge of the seat first, then carefully lift your feet and swing your legs into the car. To get out, you do the reverse: sitting on the edge of the seat, you shift your feet so they're both on the ground outside the car, then stand."

Mizuko blushed, a little embarrassed as the limo's engine purred into life and then it pulled away from the curb.

Remy picked up her hand and kissed her fingertips. "No reason to be embarrassed. Very few women are used to wearing such gowns." He smiled at her. "You'll be used to it in no time."

"It's lovely," she signed. "The jewelry reminds me of ice, which I also love very much."

"They suit you." His fingers trailed over the stones against her skin. "I like the way you look in them." The expression in his eyes told Mizuko he was thinking of something more than just the way she looked in them now.

"I'd be happy to model them for you later," Mizuko signed, her eyes holding a sultry expression.

"I very much like that idea," he signed in return. "Would you like to know more about what you'll be walking into when we arrive at the party?"

She nodded. "Anything that might help prepare me and help me know how to behave."

"Most women, or men for that matter," Remy signed, "who are there as a guest are really just there to be seen on the arm of the person they're with. Just keep your head high, your wits about you, and act as if you're besotted with me." He chuckled, though the expression in his eyes was serious. "By being at the party with me, you'll be identified as... mine. Other vampires will not harm you in any way, or they will have to face me. And likewise, at the party, I am responsible for anything you do, so if you harm someone and it is not in self-defense, I will be held accountable."

"What level of respect do you command? Since I'm a guest, I will ignore insults if they come. But if they insult you that might be different since you already told me that you seek status and position here. This is not an unfamiliar game to me," Mizuko signed seriously. "But I admit to having only observed it, not been a part of it. So, my question is how would you expect me to respond to verbal attacks against you?"

"It would be best if you did nothing at all," Remy signed. "It would only serve to weaken my position, as minor as it currently is. I am not ready to reveal my hand quite yet."

She nodded. "Then it will be as you say. No magic. No responding to insults should they come. I will remain at your arm if possible. I will also avoid using my voice, unless you ask me to say something or sing."

"A good plan," he agreed. "Tonight is more a social event, but there will always be political maneuverings. Most of the people there will be pleasant. There is one man, Leopold di Mercari, you will need to be careful of. We are not enemies, though I suppose it would be more accurate to say we are rivals. For that reason, it is very important you play your part in tonight's game well. If he has any reason to believe I have not taken steps to ensure your loyalty, or that you are anything other than a pretty piece of fluff on my arm, he will do whatever he can to make you his or destroy you."

Mizuko gave him the okay sign in reply. The warnings didn't seem to make her uncomfortable.

"Is there anything you'd like to ask me about tonight?"

"In my world, accepting food and drink from people you don't know can be dangerous, so I will not accept it here either, unless it comes from you," she signed. "I assume you would like me to keep my eyes and ears open?"

"That would be a good idea," Remy agreed. "It is unlikely anything of great importance will be discussed, but you never know when a bit of information might prove useful."

She nodded again and signed, "I think I am ready."

About twenty minutes later, the limo pulled up in front of a large building. The sign on the front, lit by several small floodlights, read "Gallery Mathius". It was hard to tell if lights were on inside because the windows were tinted so darkly. A uniformed valet stood at the base of the steps into the gallery, and he quickly crossed the sidewalk to open the limo door when the car came to a stop.

Remy climbed out, then turned and offered Mizuko his hand to assist her out.

Mizuko gave him her hand and smiled her gratitude for his help. This time, using his advice, her exit from the vehicle was much more dignified. She paused long enough to look up at the building and their surroundings, leaving her hand in his. She paused a moment, staring at the valet's tie, then straightened it. Satisfied, she patted his chest and then turned to Remy to let him know she was ready.

He bit back a smile and offered his arm to her again to lead her into the gallery. When they were three steps down from the doors, they opened from inside to reveal a pale, almost gaunt young man wearing a tuxedo. "Monsieur Deprez, welcome. Madame and the others are already here, and are waiting for you at the back of the gallery, near the offices."

Mizuko wondered what "Madame" referred to, and looked at the fellow, but only for a moment before they passed him by.

Remy's only response to the announcement was a slight nod. Once they were past the doorman and further into the gallery, he leaned his head close to Mizuko's. "You'll be meeting some people, the only ones I trust. With them, you'll be... as safe as you can be amongst my kind."

His companion inclined her head in acknowledgment and gently squeezed him to show him he needn't worry.

"I'm worried more for them," Remy said, chuckling softly in her ear, "than for you."

A smile tugged at her lips, threatening to expose her amusement. In truth, she was fascinated by the situation and excited to be there.

The gallery interior was well lit, and showed the paintings, photographs and sculpture off to their best effect. At the very back of the gallery, Mizuko saw a small group of elegantly dressed people. They turned as one as she and Remy approached.

"Remy," a beautiful woman with waist length brown hair took a step forward and greeted Remy with a kiss on either cheek, "we were worried you weren't going to make it." There was something blatantly sexual about the woman, as if you'd just caught her in mid-orgasm and she was inviting you to join her. Mizuko looked at her curiously.

"You know I wouldn't miss it, Annabeth," Remy replied easily.

While they greeted one another, Mizuko observed each of the members of the group, marking what names matched what face in her mind.

The young man Remy called Carson said little, but looked at Mizuko with a bemused expression for a moment, then turned his attention back to Remy. Something about him was familiar, she thought, but she couldn't for the life of her place him. It was probably just her imagination. She gave him a second, thoughtful look, and when he noticed, she gave him a small nod.

Laughter danced in his eyes, and he asked Remy something in rapid fire French. Remy shook his head once after glancing at Mizuko. Carson said "are you sure?"

"Yes," Remy replied curtly, and the others laughed aloud. Unaware of the cause of their amusement, Mizuko looked again at the works of art around them. There was a wide variety of art around her, though with her untutored eye she thought she could tell the differences between the artists.

"Please, don't tell me our conversation bores you," Carson said, bringing her attention back to their conversation.

She brought her eyes back to the man and tilted her head inquisitively, then lifted her chin and made a negative motion with her hand near her throat. The motion caused her little purse to swing and she brought her free hand back to hold it.

"Ah, I see. You wish us to stop talking." His grin widened. She looked back at him and raised one perfect eyebrow, the shadow of a smile upon her lips.

"Or is it me you wish to stop talking." An expression of mock dismay covered his face. "Cruel, heartless beauty." Playing as if greatly pleased by his assessment, Mizuko curtsied, duplicating the motions her queen had taught her.

He nodded his head as if accepting his due, and for a moment she saw speculation and evaluation in his eyes. Carson turned his attention back to the others.

"Please forgive the puppy's behavior," the man called Wilson said extending his hand to Mizuko.

Mizuko looked at Remy for his approval first, before allowing him to touch her. He gave her a subtle nod, so she gave Wilson her hand. He took it, and in Old World grace, placed a very proper kiss on her fingers. "It is a pleasure to finally meet you."

She blinked, a little surprised, then her fleeting smile made an appearance again. She bent her head toward him, and gave him a small but honest curtsy to indicate her pleasure at his honoring her.

The woman named Miranda spoke softly, barely loud enough for Mizuko to hear. "We all wanted to meet the woman who caused our Remy to abandon his plans and responsibilities in order to search for her when she disappeared."

"Miranda," Remy said, a warning tone in his voice.

"At ease, Remy," Annabeth interjected. "You know we all care about what happens to you, and we know you return the sentiment."

Mizuko's eyebrows shot up in surprise. She remembered he'd told her he had looked for her, but at the time she hadn't taken it seriously. She turned toward him, her hand moving up to grip his arm and looked at him

in both apology and concern.

Remy looked down and her and gave her a little smile and shake of his head. "They exaggerate, as always." Mizuko picked up, however, that he was more than a little annoyed at his friends' words.

"I offered to go looking for you," Carson said, "but he'd have none of it."

Annabeth laughed. "No, it was the red-head you were more interested in."

Mizuko turned back to Remy's friends and wondered who they were talking about.

Carson saw the expression on her face. "The red-head. The woman you with when Remy first saw you at Corazon."

Mizuko decided he must be talking about Rey. To her, Rey was always very much blonde. Of course she only ever saw Rey's pale, yellow moss-hair, which is what it really looked like. She wasn't sure what non-fae eyes saw when they looked at Rey.

Mizuko nodded and then shrugged an apology, unable to help them.

"She wasn't a red-head," Wilson added. "Her hair was a delicious shade of strawberry blonde."

"Yeah, her," Carson said earnestly. "Can you at least tell me her name? Please?"

Mizuko tugged Remy's elbow to catch his eye. Then she signed, "You know how she feels about vampires and how she was able to pick you out immediately. She is unreasonable in her opinion and I never discuss you with her for that reason. Well, I never discuss you with anyone at all to be honest. My point is that I think this is dangerous for Carson. She will hurt him if he gets close."

"Is Carson safe in general? For mortals?"

"He's harmless," Remy signed. "Mostly." He looked at Carson, then back at Mizuko. "I think it might do him some good to come up against a woman who won't give in when he crooks his little fingers." He smiled for a moment. "But Carson is unlikely to do more than look for her so he can see her. He enjoys the hunt, the finding, far more than actually doing something to or with them."

"That friend of mine is not mortal and will not react well to your friends," Mizuko signed. "Further, she has the capability to hunt and track her prey. I repeat this is a dangerous course for Carson. I would not see your friends harmed. Please tell Carson that this friend is unavailable, but if he would like a challenge, then one of my closest friends is a red-head, very attractive and young. Her name is Amber, but if he would like to know more, he must earn it. Perhaps you can make the distraction enticing to him? Amber is real and she really is my best mortal friend."

"Telling Carson Miss Lafitte is unavailable would only serve to whet his appetite," Remy signed. "But I think you may have misunderstood what I told you about him. When he "hunts" for his red-heads, he does so as a photographer would, from a distance and never really makes contact with them. He just wants to see them. But if you feel it would be too dangerous for him, then I will attempt to dissuade him later."

Mizuko thought about it, then decided to back off. "I don't know your friend. I leave it to you to decide." She returned to her position at his side and kept her eyes cast down.

"I think it would be best, Carson, if we continued this conversation later," Remy said aloud with a fond tone in his voice. "We wouldn't want you taking off in search of her before He arrived, now, would we."

Carson opened his mouth to protest, then changed his mind. "You're right. It would be bad form." He looked at Annabeth. "Is everything ready to go? Do you need me to do anything?"

Annabeth shook her head. "We are good to go. The musicians are already here, but they're in the back doing their final warmups. All we need to do is wait."

"And hope Leopold chooses not to come," Wilson added.

"He'll be here," Remy said. "He wouldn't dare miss it." He took Mizuko's hand and returned it to its proper place on his arm and held it there with a protective, slightly possessive touch.

Mizuko enjoyed the touch while looking at the soft-spoken Miranda and Annabeth, trying to guess the depth of friendship they shared with Remy. She avoided staring at eyes, but she tried to observe body posture, attire and expression. She wasn't very good at interpreting any of these, of course, but practice couldn't hurt.

One thing that immediately stood out is that even though they were all wearing different styles of clothes, they were all... perfect. The same kind of way Remy would dress in her suits - they all gave off the impression of power, leadership, being in control.

Mizuko suspected that in comparison, she was more a pretty ornament, or perhaps a jewel for Remy to show off. The idea didn't bother her of course; she'd known that going into this. What she did find curious was that none of his friends had companions with them.

A door which must lead to the offices and storage areas of the gallery opened, and four young people - three men and one woman - emerged, each carrying a string instrument. One of the men, upon seeing Remy, immediately stepped forward. "Mr. Deprez," he said, "I wanted to thank you again for this..."

Remy waved his hand negligently, though there was a fond smile on his face. "There is no need for you to thank me every time you see me, Albert. You and your friends have great talent, and deserve to be heard."

Mizuko curiously watched the quartet set up. They were to be positioned in a corner at the back of the gallery. Albert, who appeared to be the group's leader, spoke quickly and quietly to the others then took his seat. A moment later, they started playing. It was a classical piece, though that was all Mizuko was able to recognize of it. She didn't have great skill as a singer, but she enjoyed it from time to time, so she listened intently to the tune so she might hum it some other time.

"They are talented, aren't they," Remy whispered in her ear.

Mizuko looked up at him, smiled and nodded. She put her other hand on his arm, too.

"Trying to keep me from leaving your side, are you?" he asked with a chuckle.

She loosened her grip but wasn't embarrassed. Her smile continued to show and his amusement was matched in her eyes. So far it had been pleasant, even fun, and she was ready to see what else the evening had in store for them.

"Keep that smile in place, ma petite," he whispered. "Tonight's battles are about to begin." As if on cue, an old-fashioned grandfather clock began to chime the hour, and the first guests arrived.

Remy's friends appeared to close ranks with him, providing a united front against all comers. It reminded Mizuko of her motley's dynamic, all for one and one for all.

She kept the smile up, though it no longer touched her eyes. She glanced at Remy's friends around them and found their presence oddly comforting despite the fact they were probably none of them mortals or anything

like herself at all.

A steady stream of people entered the gallery, all of them coming to greet Remy before moving on to look at the artwork. To a one, men and women, they looked at Mizuko once and then dismissed her as beneath their notice. Despite their behavior, Mizuko knew that against whatever scorecard Remy was being judged, her presence on his arm had won him several points. Mizuko maintained her somewhat insincere smile and reflected upon the fact that they all considered her merely a mortal and for them to think anything else could be dangerous.

A murmur ran through the crowd and then everything hushed until the only sound was the string quartet. A large black man - it was obvious Mizuko that he was built like a linebacker and not a single ounce of him was fat - approached Remy with an air a few whiskers shy of insolence and disrespect. "Remy," he said, his bass voice rumbled through the room, and every single eye in the room was focused in this man and Remy. Tension suddenly jumped in the room, though to Mizuko's eye, not a thing had changed in the expressions or body language of the assembled guests.

"Leopold," Remy said politely with a slight nod of his head.

Mizuko kept her gaze averted and her hands on Remy's arm. Standing there and getting nervous wasn't going to help, so she decided the best thing she could do was to lend Remy strength should he need it. She stood still and thought about the spring at the hollow where she would play with Ollie. The thought made her smile brighter, her cheeks less pale, and her hands cool and calm.

"So, this is your newest toy, is it?" Leopold's voice had a razor-sharp undertone.

"She is my companion," Remy replied calmly as if discussing the weather. Out of the corner of her eye, Mizuko saw Carson shift his position slightly, changing the angle at which he faced Leopold.

Feeling Leopold's eyes on her, Mizuko was drawn out of her happy place of memory. She began to feel rather exposed and naked in her slinky, sexy dress. But she's promised; no magic. So she instead tried to focus on another distraction; the wary emotions this man was generating in Remy and his friends. They weren't afraid; only tense and wary. She decided she could live with that.

Leopold and Remy exchanged a few more seemingly innocent words before Leopold walked away. Miranda had stepped up close behind Remy, and Mizuko heard her whisper "I loathe that man."

Mizuko turned her head slightly wondering if she was meant to hear that and if so, if it was meant as a show of sympathy for being referred to as a toy. She decided that since her status here was somewhere between "bug" and "ornament", that seemed unlikely. Still, she preferred to imagine the soft-spoken Miranda was as pleasant as Remy tended to be. She pinched her lip with her teeth, then returned her attention to Remy and the main floor.

The tension level in the gallery dropped, but didn't disappear completely. People moved around the room in small groups, sometimes coming together and then separating into different combinations. As Remy and his friends circulated, Remy signed to Mizuko the names of some of the people there.

A while after the confrontation with Leopold - Mizuko had no idea how long, as there were no clocks and no outside cues as to the time - the doorman approached Remy with an envelope sealed with a seal of blue wax. "This just arrived for you, sir."

Remy took it with a nod of thanks and without glancing at the seal, opened it. He pulled out the card and quickly read the handwritten note inside. "He's not coming." He handed the card to Annabeth.

"You're joking." She looked at the note for herself. "He'd rather stay home and watch a movie than attend



tonight? What on earth is he thinking?"

"We will not discuss this now." Remy's voice was firm, and brooked no disobedience. His friends looked at each other and then nodded.

Mizuko let her gaze drift around the gallery, trying not to look too curious. Then she let go of Remy's arm long enough to sign, "I'm a little dry. May I have something to drink?"

"Of course," he answered aloud. "There's champagne, some wine, and there is bottled water in the back. I can have some brought out for you."

"Just water would be fine," she signed. "Thank you, Remy."

He quirked an eyebrow at her thanks, then true to his word, had a bottle brought from the back, along with an attractive glass goblet. The servant cracked the bottle open in front and poured the contents in the goblet. Remy took it from him and presented it to Mizuko.

Before she took it, she signed at him. "Now, it is unfortunate in a way, that I promised not to do magic because I gather that it could be useful to you to know what that man," she nodded slightly in Leopold's direction, "feared most. And that should that water be in listening distance of any conversation of any conversation I could pick it up later and ask it to repeat to me all that was said."

"Things like that and more, however, might require the use of a favor, however." She smiled at him and then signed, "Food for thought." Then she took the goblet from him and took a nice long drink. She smiled again and then handed it back to him.

Remy was quiet for a moment. "Is that something you can do without anyone... noticing?" he signed around the drink in his hand.

"As I mentioned before, you are the only one I have ever known to be able to sense my use of magic. I suspect it is because a symbolic link between us was forged when you tasted of me. My blood. Maybe it opened something between us. But so long as you are not touching me when I use it, I don't think even you will sense it." She bowed graciously, keeping up the act of an obedient companion for the benefit of onlookers.

"But I also understand if you don't wish to take the risk, or if you'd rather save the for some other use. I simply felt you should have at least some idea of... the available tools." She'd implied that she was capable of much more, and had done so as a calculated move. In this environment, while they could be watched, what was said might be controlled, what he asked her to do could be limited.

"It is very tempting," Remy signed, "knowing what he is afraid of could be of great use." He looked at Leopold for a moment. "If I were to ask you to find it, what price would I have to pay?" he whispered, his lips brushing her ear in a featherlight caress.

She leaned against him a little, enjoying the feeling for a moment before she answered. Then she signed, "Only a small thing. A minor favor, of which you already have two you may ask. Or I might simply find out these things as I see fit, should you release me of my promise not to work magic tonight, and then share what I find with you at a convenient time for you."

"I release you from your promise, providing the magic you work is unobtrusive and unnoticed," Remy replied in sign, "and I shall find some way to reward you, should I consider the information you give me useful."

Agreed?" The look in his eye revealed the full nature of the reward he would give.

A wickedly pleased gleam shone in Mizuko's violet eyes and she curtsied as deeply and gracefully as her dress would allow. "Agreed, my handsome prince," she signed. "Oh, you have chosen very well. Place the water where ever you wish. Consider it a listening device. The rest, leave to me."

She returned her hands to Remy's arm and she gazed across the room toward Leopold, looking for insight. She released Remy and stepped away long enough to work her magic without being in contact with him. She made no other overt action or elaborate gesture but simply called upon her internal reserves of magic and drew forth what she sought.

Leopold, she knew instantly, was afraid of losing power. This meant to him, losing his wealthy and influence. This idea was more frightening to him than any other. She dug deeper, calling upon her Witch's Gaze to tell her what horror that befell him affected him the worst. She immediately was enveloped in a vision of violence. Something human-like in form but not human was attacking Leopold, holding him by his neck and gnawing upon his flesh, noisily slurping at the blood that streamed down Leopold's body. The monster wore the young-looking man with pale blond hair, but she knew better than to think it was human. The aggressor made no attempt to make the experience pleasant, but rejoiced in the horror and pain that it inflicted upon Leopold.

Mizuko saw Leopold's reflexive kicking his heels at the brick wall to which he was pinned as his life drained away, listened as his screams became whimpers. She heard the bestial grunts and greedy lapping of the monster as he fed from Leopold's life blood, leaving his victim with nothing, not even his life.

When Leopold's struggles ceased, the beast tossed him casually aside and prepared to leave. Mizuko could smell Leopold's death in the air. But then the beast that had killed him turned back and with an ugly, burbling chuckle, cut open his wrist and let a few drops of blood spatter Leopold across the face and mouth. Then it left.

Her vision ended when Leopold's corpse suddenly drew a ragged breath and he began screaming.

When she opened her eyes again, she wasn't in the gallery. A quick look around revealed mundane office furniture, and Remy, half-seated on the desk, watching her carefully.

Mizuko blinked and started. After a moment, she focused on Remy and folded down the jacket so she could use her hands. "Well. That was new."

"What you saw," Remy signed, "or the fact you passed out and have been unconscious for several hours?"

She stared at Remy. "What? I thought you said hours." She thought he must have used the wrong sign.

"I did. It's close to 5 am," Remy said aloud.

"That's disappointing," Mizuko signed with a bitter expression on her face. "There was so much more I could do, but for that distraction."

"Do you always pass out like that after try to read someone's fears?" Remy signed.

"No. Fear is what I am." Her eyes shifted back and forth. "Well, not exactly. Fear is what I understand. I am the Legate of Mists, envoy of the Ashen Queen herself. I don't expect you to understand what that means, just understand that I have used my powers to see terrible things. I've seen dark gods warp the flesh of mortals until they were no longer human. I've seen what nightmares lurk in the hearts of men and women. I've seen my friends cut apart by madmen. Okay, granted I didn't take that very well.

"But until tonight, I'd never seen what made a beast like Leopold."

"What made Leopold." Remy thought quickly. "You mean as a man, or as a vampire?" he signed.

"Wealth and influence make him as would be. He fears losing that, or even the thought of losing that, the most. I dove into his nightmares as well and pulled forth the vision of the event that made him a vampire. I saw every bleeding, ragged breath he took, watched as his heels kicked uselessly at the wall in rhythm to the fading beat of his heart. I saw, too, the monster that looked like a young man with pale hair that ripped at his throat, gorging on Leopold's blood like a great leech, all teeth and mad with hunger. I smelled the foulness of Leopold's death and watched as his master spattered his prey's dead face with his own blood as if it were a casual afterthought because it was more cruel to watch Leopold's tortured corpse reanimate."

Mizuko looked unflinchingly into Remy's eyes and it had to make him wonder if she saw into his soul, too. "His mind and soul was torn from him and rendered down into its bestial components. Now what holds him together is a singular desire for wealth and influence — power over his world so that he would not become such a victim again. Now I know what words will break him, cause him to flee in terror like the beast he is. Yes, I would say I know what makes Leopold what he is. And now, so do you."

Any evidence of Remy's opinion of what he thought of the information was hidden from his face. "How can you bear to see those things," he signed, his fingers making small gestures, as if he whispered, "How do you not lose yourself to them?"

"I bear it because I know fear... intimately. Part of what holding the title of Legate of Mists means I am a member of the Autumn Court. This is the Court of Fear, the Ashen Court of which I spoke. It is not the Court of Happy Dancing Bunnies and Love." She sighed. "But apparently I did lose myself to the vision tonight. I hope I didn't cause you irreparable harm or embarrassment. What excuse did you have to make?"

"That you 'overexerted' yourself earlier." His lips twisted in wry amusement. "Everyone there is well aware of the ways in which I find enjoyment with my companions, and they came to their own conclusions."

Mizuko laughed. "I bet they did," she signed with an amused smile. "Was I unconscious or catatonic?"

"Unconscious," he said, "I caught you before you did more than slump backwards a little. You did wriggle delightfully against me when I swept you up into my arms, and protested mightily when I set you down in that chair.

"That's good," Mizuko replied. "Catatonia implies insanity and I definitely don't need any of that. Unconscious and wiggly is okay."

"Very wiggly," Remy added with a smile, and she could see that look coming to life in his eyes.

"Nothing you couldn't handle I hope?" she asked with an innocent batting of her eyelids.

"Sometimes, delaying the handling of such things is better," he replied. While his face was innocent, his eyes were most definitely not.

"I see," she teased, looking at the coat. "Maybe you want this back?" She stood up and presented him with his coat. "*Unless there is something else you see that you'd like to handle?*"

He took the jacket and tossed it aside. "Are you offering?" He took a step toward her.

"Think of it as a standing offer," she invited.

He took another step closer, but the sound of polite applause drifted through the slightly open doorway. "This

office is no place to explore such things," he said regretfully. "Do you wish to return to the party?"

She gave him a small smile and nod. "Lead on," she signed. Her eyes swept past the doorway.

Remy extended his arm. Mizuko checked to be sure she still had her purse, then returned to the party at Remy's side.

Mizuko immediately noticed there were fewer people than earlier; Leopold and some others had left. Those who remained - including all of Remy's friends - seemed more relaxed.

When she spotted Miranda, Annabeth, Wilson and Carson, she gave them a little smile and nod. Annabeth acknowledge it with little more than a flick of her eyes, while Carson sent her a faint hopeful look. Miranda, however, returned Mizuko's smile.

Mizuko removed her pen and palm-sized note book from her purse and jotted a brief message before dropping her pen with a metallic clank back into her purse and closing it. She presented the note to Remy's friends. It read, "My name is Mizuko. I apologize for my lack of constitution tonight and wish to say it is entirely my own fault, not Remy's."

"Don't cover for him," Miranda said with a laugh in her voice. "We know his appetites very well. He should have paced things better." Carson merely grinned and nodded.

Mizuko's smile became genuine and widened enough to show a flash of her pearly whites. She put away the little notebook and took the opportunity to draw upon her Sight in order to confirm her suspicions about Remy's friends. To her Sight, they were in fact vampires. The fact that made her feel safer was probably a concern she needed to think about later.

"Leopold left shortly after you'd taken Mizuko into the back," Annabeth said. "He seemed rather pleased at her fainting as she did."

"And others left later, once it was evident He wasn't going to be making an appearance," Wilson added.

Mizuko cocked her head curiously at Wilson, wondering again who this "He" was they kept speaking of.

"Typical," Miranda said, almost too softly to be heard. "He will be the death of us all."

"That's enough of that talk," Remy said. "This is neither the time nor the place."

Mizuko turned and signed to Remy, "It sounds like this person needs a Legate of his own."

"That would not solve his problems," Remy signed with restrained movements.

She nodded, finally beginning to understand that Remy and his friends were not supporters of whoever this "He" was.

Mizuko pulled out her notebook and pen again and jotted down another message to show Remy's friends. It read, "I'm glad to have met all of you. My instincts tell me Remy could not have better friends."

Carson, Miranda, Wilson, Annabeth and Remy all looked at each other and smiled.