

After the general excitement and danger of dealing with the killer over the past couple days, Mizuko had a chance to return to her apartment to get caught up on some much needed rest. But her mind kept turning to Drake and the evening of dance, talk, and comfort they'd shared last week. After the past few days, it was something she really needed.

Remy was a big question mark, though. If she was going to try to make being with Drake a regular thing, Amber kept telling her that she needed to break things off with Remy. The problem with that was that she still really liked Remy. She felt deep gratitude for all he'd done for her in the past. He was sexy and a gentleman. He'd introduced her to some things she doubted she'd ever have realized she would enjoy. She'd even risked her own life to keep her relationship with him.

But he couldn't be with her in the way that Drake could. He couldn't stay with her until dawn. He couldn't let her into much of his real life like Drake could. He did what she wanted, but when it was over, that was it. It was... empty. Mizuko had felt used after the last time they'd had sex, regardless how much she enjoyed it. Still, it was hard to risk what she did have with Remy unless she knew there was a real chance for something better. Change was difficult for her and it had left deep wounds already. If her life might change again in a dramatic way, she had to know the risk was worth it. If she told Remy she wanted to pursue a relationship with someone else and he threw her out onto the street, she really didn't know what she'd do — especially if she'd misread Drake, or if he'd changed his mind about seeing her again.

She had to call Drake. She didn't know what she was going to say, but she needed to let him know she wanted to try and to know that he was willing to give a relationship a try as well. Then she could worry about what to say to Remy. Mizuko looked at the time and noted it was mid afternoon. She picked up her phone and dialed the number he'd given her before he left Saturday morning.

A very perky, very young sounding female answered. "Hello, Drake's phone!"

Mizuko frowned. *"Wow um. Are you his voicemail? Am I about to feel very silly and will you cut me off with a beep?"*

The girl on the other end of the phone laughed. "No, I'm not his voicemail. He's in the middle of-- Nope, here he is."

"Hello?" Drake sounded a bit out of breath.

*"Hi Drake. It's Mizuko. I was hoping I could ask you question. Are you busy right now?"*

"Not at all," Drake replied, and she could hear the smile in his voice. "Go ahead and ask your question."

*"Okay. This is hard for me to ask."* She took a breath and thought about hanging up right now. After all, if she didn't ask then he didn't have to say no. *"I've been thinking about it all weekend, though I just didn't have a chance to call until now."* She was procrastinating now and she knew it.

"Well, just go ahead and ask me," he replied with a chuckle.

*"I like you a lot,"* she told him, *"and I was wondering if you might be willing to give a relationship a try."*

"Going steady," said Amber suddenly. Mizuko jumped and dropped the phone.

"Sorry," said her friend, as she breezed past the entryway and headed toward the kitchen. "I thought you heard me come in. Anyway, that's what it's called."

*"I know that,"* grumbled Mizuko as she picked up the phone. *"Drake? Drake I'm sorry. I dropped the phone. Did you say something?"*

"Going steady. That's a term I haven't heard or used since high school. But yes, I'd like to see you again, and have a relationship with you. As long as you're willing to agree to some ground rules."

"*What are the ground rules?*" she asked.

"First, we don't have sex of any kind until we've been seeing each other for at least a month. Second, we agree we don't have to spend every waking moment together, that we have lives outside of the relationship. And third, we respect the other person's right to say no."

Mizuko considered. "*Okay, I will agree to the second and the third rules. But the first one needs some adjustment, Drake. If you mean no sex with each other for the first month, then maybe. But no way am I going to make it a month if I'm going to be dating a guy as hot as you and I can't even masturbate.*"

Over in the kitchen, Amber broke into peels of laughter.

"Not helping, Amber," Mizuko growled.

"With each other," Drake replied. "Or other people. Pleasuring oneself is fine. But this is just an agreement, Mizuko, not some pact we have to negotiate and pledge to. It has to be a matter of trust. Because it's something we want to do."

"*So, why a month. Is this time important to you? Like is that when some pledge you made to another girl expires or do you have a birthday coming up or something?*"

"Because, in my experience, if it's just lust that draws two people together, they'll drift apart before the month is up. I don't think making sex the foundation of a lasting relationship is a good thing."

Mizuko thought about that. "*I will respect your belief. I agree to your ground rules. May I have one, too?*"

"What is it?"

"*I'll let you know next month. There are things that need to be done, now.*" She made to close the phone and end the call, but stopped and said, "*I- I appreciate this, Drake. Good bye.*"

"Talk to you later, Mizuko."

Amber had finished assembling a pair of bowls with ice cream and fudge with a spoon stabbed into the top. She plopped on the couch next to Mizuko and offered her one. "So. You're going to go with Drake, huh?"

Mizuko nodded. "Yes," she said as she grabbed the offered bowl and began sampling a little the cold treat.

"What are you going to do about Remy?"

"*I have no freaking clue.*"

"You said freaking," Amber remarked. "Think we'll get thrown out on our asses?"

"*Unless I can smooth talk him into letting us all be friends.*"

"I'll make sure our stuff is packed," Amber concluded.

"*Your faith in me is inspiring, Amber,*" Mizuko said drily.

"I still think you are making a mistake, Zuko."

Mizuko was quiet. They ate some dessert in quiet. Then she said, *"I don't think he thinks of me like I'm a real person."*

"Why do you say that?"

*"When he came over last week we had sex."*

"So I heard."

Mizuko made a face. *"The point is that when he was done it felt like he was just rewarding me for being a good girl, not like he cared."*

"How so? Did he do something you didn't like?"

*"No, I liked what he did. But then he just gave me a quick kiss on the head and left. It felt cold, and I realized that a lot of our relationship was like that. He gives me what I like, sort of like a reward, but he always leaves. I don't think he wants to be close. But I do. And I think I can have that closeness with Drake."*

Amber said, "I don't know, Mizuko. I still think you are making a mistake. I bet Remy would stick around when you needed if he knew you needed him to."

*"Maybe. But I want him to want to stick around. I don't want to have to tell him."*

Amber sighed. "Okay. It's just we have a pretty good thing going here. I admit that I really would rather not get tossed out on my ass, but you do what you gotta do. I'll be here for you."

Mizuko smiled.

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The shift ended at ten at night and by ten minutes after, Mizuko was walking home with her phone to ear calling Rey.

"Hey, Miz," Rey said. "What's up?"

*"I'm up. Are you? I really need some advice."*

"About what?"

*"Guys."*

"Ah. This could take a while. Should I come pick you up somewhere?"

*"That would be okay,"* Mizuko agreed. *"I'm walking home from Corazon's."*

"Meet you at your place then?"

"Yes. I will see you there."

Twenty minutes later, Mizuko met Rey in the lobby and walked her up to the apartment. Once inside Mizuko offered Rey a beer, a wheat she told Rey, and she'd get a slice of lemon with it.

Rey chuckled. "I prefer stouts or porters," she said, "but the wheat will be fine, I don't remember Corazon serving craft beers. Did Alexei add them recently?"

Mizuko shook her head. *"I tried one at your pub. I went with Drake."* She smiled.

"I see. Is the advice you're seeking about what to do when you've got two guys in your sights?"

The look on Mizuko's face was telling. She turned her face away. *"I don't think I want two. I don't think either of them would like that."* She looked back at Rey. *"But I'm in kind of deep with one while I want to date the other."*

"I'm afraid you're going to have to make a choice." Rey watched Mizuko's expression. "What do you mean by in deep with one?"

*"Remy has given me this place to live and we have an agreement. An alliance with the Queen's blessing and command."* Mizuko looked at Rey. *"I don't want to harm Remy. How did you do it with Chase? How did you tell him you were going to date someone else?"*

"I just stopped going out with him, and Chase figured it out," Rey replied. "Not exactly the best way to do it, but that's how it happened. With the pledge you've got with Remy, that's not going to work. You're going to have to say something to him."

*"He has a temper when I say things he doesn't want to hear. Assuming I don't want to kill him, what would you suggest?"* Mizuko asked. Her tone wasn't cold exactly. Just more dispassionate than one would expect in a woman who'd been so very much into a man. It was an obvious change in Mizuko, one that seemed abrupt.

Rey looked at her friend, trying to figure out what was going on. "What happened between you and Remy?"

Mizuko put down her beer and switched to sign language. "Nothing that is really very different. I spoke with Annabeth and she... sort of woke me up. She made me angry at the time because I didn't like what she was telling me. But in essence she pointed out that what I was doing, sitting here and throwing myself at Remy on the rare occasion when he shows up and doing little else was pathetic. The last time Remy visited, I realized I was doing exactly that. I threw myself at him like usual, so he fucked me and left me, which is typically what we do. Only I realized that it all left me feeling kind of empty. Like a pet whom he likes to keep and reward, but not much more. I compared that to how I felt in just one night spent with Drake and I realized that there might be more to relationships than just this. I went on a date with Drake over the weekend and we didn't even have sex, but he stayed with me. We talked. I felt good about myself. I think he enjoyed being with me, despite my crazy hangups and poor conversation. So earlier today I asked if he would like to really give this a try. Dating."

Mizuko told Rey about Drake's ground rules and that she agreed to them, though she had reservations about the no sex thing for a month. She really liked sex and knows how unhappy she was with Remy when she wasn't getting any. But she agreed to his terms. Those terms included not having sex with others and Amber advised her that trying to date two men was a very bad idea.

So, Mizuko was trying to decide how to not date Remy without wrecking their lives, angering Remy, or worse, ending up in a deadly battle. Mortals engaged in an argument were bad enough. Supernaturals were the equivalent of mortals armed to the teeth having an argument. And Mizuko knew Remy had a temper where she was concerned, and she explained to Rey that she thought it was because she still felt there were real feelings for her that he simply wasn't dealing with or recognizing — and that might be the underlying problem with their relationship.

"He might have gotten angry because he doesn't like being questioned about things," Rey pointed out. "I know you don't want to hear this, but I don't think vampires are capable of love. Infatuation or lust, perhaps."

Anger and fear, definitely. But not love."

Mizuko made a negative motion with her hands. "That doesn't matter right now. What we do know is they are capable of anger."

"Of course it matters now," Rey said with a frown. "If he can't feel love, then what feelings do you think he has for you?"

"I don't know and that's the point of dating someone else." Mizuko sighed before continuing, "Now that you've rubbed my face in it, do you have any suggestions or not?"

"Listen, Mizuko," Rey said sharply before taking a quick deep breath to calm herself. "You're asking me for help, and I can't do that unless I know what's going on. Do you still love Remy?"

Mizuko looked uncertain at that. "Maybe. I don't know. I'm not happy with it, but I do not hate him."

"Okay. If you weren't ever able to have sex with him ever again, for any reason, would you still want to be with him?"

"Be with him in what way?" Mizuko asked.

"Just that. Hang around with him. Sit and talk. Watch a movie."

"If he was not angry, then sure, why not?"

Rey sighed. She didn't think Mizuko was getting what she was trying to say. "Are you trying to make Remy jealous?"

"No. I'm trying to date Drake, as I said. Amber says it's not a good idea to date two men at once," Mizuko repeated her earlier statement.

"And she's right. So if you're not trying to make Remy jealous, and you don't know what Remy's feelings for you are, then why do you want to leave Remy?"

Mizuko tilted her head. "It is difficult. With Remy I can have sex, but only rarely and usually it feels like a reward for being a good pet. I won't get any sex with Drake but he likes being with me, despite my flaws. He doesn't treat me like a pet. If you had to choose, which would you pick?"

"Drake," Rey said. "Because with him, I wouldn't have to hide as much of my life, and he'd have a much better understanding and chance of accepting me for me. And like with Chase, I'd have to worry about Remy losing control and literally tearing me to pieces. But what do you mean you won't get any sex with Drake. Do you mean ever?"

"At least a month. I figure if it doesn't work with him then yes that means ever. He says he doesn't want to found the relationship on sex." Mizuko sighed and looked a little unhappy. "I almost didn't accept his ground rules because of that. It means all I have left to offer is my personality."

"Mizuko, there's nothing wrong with your personality. Sure, parts of it needs some work, but everyone's got issues." Rey shook her head. "I have to say I admire Drake for wanting to told off on sex."

"So now you know you would have made the same choice I have. Do you have any experience in this area?" Of course, she meant talking to Remy about it. "Or should I just do as you did with Chase? Just leave it be."

"What does my making the same choice as you have to do with this?"

Mizuko grew frustrated. "You wanted to know why I chose the way I did. You know now."

Rey sat there quietly, almost enjoying the state Mizuko was working herself into. "You need to break it off with Remy, and do it tactfully."

At last, Rey was getting around to the question Mizuko had posed. Mizuko waited to see what she would say.

"You want me to tell you what to say?"

"If you think that would help. Otherwise if you have advice, I would like to hear it. I'm out of my... element," Mizuko admitted.

Rey bit back a smile. "I don't think I can tell you the exact words to use," Rey said, "because I know very little about your relationship with Remy. But you do need to address the fact you've come to realize you're not getting what you need out of the relationship. I don't think you can break it off completely with him either, not if you have to maintain the pledge. Change the relationship from personal to business."

Mizuko nodded thoughtfully. "Business." She thought some more. That might be the kind of relationship Remy could relate to. But what would the business be? It might be interesting to find out.

"What are you thinking?" Rey asked, because she knew that when her friend got that look on her face that things might just end up... complicated.

"I am interested in his business," Mizuko signed. "This could work. I could simply find some way to tell him I would like our relationship to be business rather than personal."

"That would probably be best," Rey said with a nod.

"I appreciate your advice. This helps. I will remain cautious, but I think there is some hope of things not getting out of hand now."

"If you are concerned about that, you might want to have the conversation someplace public. He's not the kind of person, I don't think, to let his temper get the best of him where everyone could see. Or you could make sure you're not alone with him, have someone you trust with you. Or both."

"Maybe someone with me. I do not want it to be too public, though." Mizuko decided that if he lost his temper, it might not matter if it was public or not. She didn't believe she would, and if in public, she would be at an extreme disadvantage if she cared at all about keeping her magic out of the public eye. It wasn't that it would bother her as it would most changelings just to let mortals see her work magic. But she was more concerned that the wrong sorts of people might see it and cause problems later. "Someone Remy trusts and respects as well, I suppose, would be ideal." Giving Remy the impression she was setting an ambush was also not desirable.

"I didn't mean in the middle of a shopping mall or anything like that. But somewhere that's neither his place or yours. A neutral location." Rey tucked a loose lock of hair behind her ear. "Did you have someone in mind to ask?"

"Perhaps one of Remy's friends, yes."

The two motley mates raised glasses, discussed recent events, and then called it an evening. Mizuko needed to get ready for the next step.

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When Rey was home, she dialed Richard's number. She wasn't expecting him to answer, so she planned to leave a brief message on his voicemail.

He answered in a hushed tone. "Hello Rey."

"Hi," she replied softly, surprised he answered. "I was going to leave a message for you. Mizuko's breaking off her personal relationship with Remy. She's decided she likes Drake better."

There was a pause and Rey could imagine his smile spreading across his face. "This is good news. Do you expect trouble?"

"I don't know. Mizuko says he's got a temper, but she can be rather... abrupt at times. She asked me for advice, since I'm obviously in a successful relationship." Rey smiled. "I told her a couple of things, and suggested she not do it alone, and to do it in a neutral location - not one owned by him or her."

"Do you know when this is happening?"

"No, but I was going to call her tomorrow to find out. Hopefully she's not going to rush into this." Rey clenched her teeth for a moment to keep from yawning. "Would you like me to let you know when it is?"

"If you think you can, yes."

This time Rey couldn't hold back a yawn. "I'm sorry, but I'm going to turn into a pumpkin soon if I don't get to bed." An impish little grin danced on her lips. "Would you mind terribly if I pretended you tucked me in tonight?" She laughed softly.

The low rumble she heard was Richard's version of a chuckle. "Good night my love."

A brilliant smile lit up Rey's face, and those four simple words made her feel like she'd won the lottery. "Good night."

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After Rey left, Mizuko put in a call to Glasshouse and asked the assistant manager who answered if Annabeth Milogie was in tonight. They put Ms. Milogie on the line after a short pause.

"Hello. It's Mizuko," she said. "Would you have time to speak with me tonight?"

"I could certainly make time for you," Annabeth replied. "Here at Glasshouse?"

"Yes. I'll be there soon. I appreciate this, Annabeth."

Mizuko changed into some tight, faux leather pants and a green top supported by a single strap over the left shoulder, which Amber told her looked both attractive and assertive.

"Are you going out by yourself Mizuko?" Amber asked. Mizuko nodded so Amber asked, "Can I go, too?"

Mizuko shook her head. "I have to do this on my own."

"Where you going?"

"Glasshouse."

"Well, how are you going to get in without any ID."

"However I need to."

Amber gave Mizuko a sour look. "Good luck."

Mizuko took a cab to the club. It was expensive for her, but she didn't want to waste any more time tonight on buses or long walks. She waded through to the head of the line with all the attitude of an Autumn Queen, and amid some surprised looks as well as a few ogling glances, she was let in. It might have had as much to do with how the door man appreciated the way her pants made her ass looked as much as her attitude.

Once inside, she took a look around and headed toward stairs, but her journey nearly met an early end. She thought she heard a growl and barely avoided someone grabbing her arm.

"Hello again," said the man with too much metal in his face. "How's about that dance now? My friends and I got a real nice place out back with just the right music." He sported a shaved head today, but otherwise looked about the same. At least instead of blood, he smelled of alcohol.

Mizuko shook her head, and dove into a group of women who had been leaving a booth to go dance. There were a few startled shouts, but she was able to put the group between herself and the man and dash upstairs. She slowed at the top to smooth her hair and catch her breath. Then she headed to the private lounge safe in the belief she'd lost the werewolf. She was wrong.

She found Annabeth there and closing the door to the lounge behind her effectively reduced the rowdy noise of the club to a background murmur. She smiled. "*Hello Ms. Milogie.*"

"Hello, Ms. Naia. Please, have a seat." Annabeth gestured at the loveseat opposite her.

"*Please call me Mizuko,*" she said as she crossed the room and settled down in front of Annabeth.

"You're looking very fine this evening." The vampire's gaze ran over the nymph, noting what she wore with approval. Annabeth herself was wearing a simple black dress - if you could call a dress with elaborate cut-out designs like a spider's web simple.

"*I do not compare to you. That dress is probably the envy of every woman in the club,*" Mizuko asserted factually.

"Perhaps, but the men would certainly hover around you like bees to a flower, if you'd let them."

Mizuko looked at Annabeth. "*If I were a smarter woman, I would have skipped jumping into a relationship and just went with enjoying whoever caught my eye in an evening. Instead, I have issues.*"

"Issues?"

"*You made me a little angry the other night,*" Mizuko said. "*For which I'm glad. It made me think. When Remy came over the following night, I did what I always do. I threw myself at him and when he was satisfied I with that, he took me and then he left me. While I lay there I listened to your words and I realized how true they were. I am not a pet. The way he used me made me cry.*" She looked at Annabeth with hard clear eyes.



"He wouldn't have seen it that way."

"No, I don't suppose he would. But I've discovered there is a man who would not just fuck me, pat me on the head, and then leave me. Someone willing to do something with me, rather than simply to me. All those men in the club you say would be drawn to me? They want to do something to me, not just be with me." Mizuko leaned forward, earnestly trying to make Annabeth understand. "I do care for Remy. I think I love him. And I certainly don't wish to hurt him. But I want to see Drake. If I do that, I can't see Remy in a physical sense. I would like our relationship to change, not end. To make it more about business and alliance. And if he would allow it, friendship."

Mizuko bit her lip. "I have a hard time communicating with Remy. I'm afraid I will make him angry. I do not want to hurt him."

"I'm pretty sure he doesn't want to be hurt." Annabeth looked at Mizuko for a moment before continuing. "I don't think it would be a problem, if it was done the right way."

"Do you think if I told him I didn't want to have sex with him anymore it would be okay?"

"Not in those exact words, I hope," Annabeth replied. "You need to give a reason, a positive spin on it. Like the relationship would be stronger, and more advantageous, if the physical aspect was taken out of it."

Mizuko brightened. "Yes. I need spin. Something that would convince him this is the best way because I'll be honest. If he turns that charm on..." She shook her head. "My hormones don't listen to my brain."

"I don't think your honesty will be influential in his decision," Annabeth said carefully, "but if it's pointed out you'll be far more effective if he isn't distracting you, I'm sure I could convince Remy to leave Drake alone."

Mizuko froze. "There is a chance he might hurt Drake?"

"I'm not sure. Remy's always been the one to end a relationship. I'm not sure how he'd take you doing first." The vampire shrugged. "I doubt it would be physical, though. Remy might use his influence to make things difficult for Drake."

"I think I should see Remy very soon. If he finds out about Drake, I'd like it to be from me first."

"Tonight's out of the question, and tomorrow night isn't good either." Annabeth knew Remy's plans, and there was no way he could change them, not without ruining everything he and the coterie were working so hard for. "Wednesday is likely the earliest. Did you want to meet here at the club?"

Mizuko realized it was the perfect neutral ground, owned by both vampire and changeling. She smiled and nodded. "That is very generous of you. I would appreciate it."

"Have you thought about having some of your changeling friends with you," Annabeth said, "for moral support?"

Mizuko shook her head. "I don't want him to feel like I'm ambushing him on this, or ganging up on him. Do you think he will need moral support?"

"I doubt it, but it might be good to have a friend with you anyway. A witness, and a united front. If you've got someone with you," Annabeth said, "it might actually help to keep things calm. One person with you won't feel like an ambush."

"None of my fae friends ever approved of my relationship with Remy in the first place, save for the Winter King, and I can't ask him to be there. It is his time to rule. Other than that I have Amber, but I don't think

*Remy has much respect for her. Can you be there?"*

"Yes, but I'm not going to be able to be purely on your side on this." Annabeth shook her head. "I'm Remy's friend and member of his coterie before I'm yours. Are you sure there's nobody? None of your friends will stand with you on this, or do you simply not want to ask them?"

Mizuko shook her head. *"There are only two I trust who really know anything about this. One because she was there when I first met Remy, but who has always warned me never to get involved with vampires, and the other is the Queen who found out on her own. I do not share what and who Remy is with anyone. I promised. So, if I was to ask anyone else I would have to break that promise. So no. There is no one."*

Annabeth looked at Mizuko. "But, if your friend already knows about Remy and that you were seeing him, then in my interpretation of the pledge, you wouldn't be breaking it, so I don't see what the problem is. But, if you're determined to do this alone, then I suppose you will. You can't count on anyone from the coterie to speak for you." She shrugged.

Mizuko thought about it, and looked like she might reconsider. But then she shook her head. *"No, I can't ask her. She was already put in the crosshairs of one vampire, Leopold. It is too dangerous. I may tell her about my meeting, but that is all."*

Mizuko frowned. She was reluctant to say the next part, but she felt she should. When she spoke, it was from hard-learned experience from the time she was nearly beaten to death because she stayed to protect some prostitutes instead of protecting her own hide. *"Annabeth, the truth is that I can protect myself from harm, but I cannot protect others if I do so. This is how I ended up hurt so badly I nearly died twice last summer. I will protect my friends with my life because that's who I am. The one I could ask... she cannot escape, or make herself into impenetrable ice or sheath themselves in fire or simply disincorporate and fly away invisibly on the wind like I can. If something bad happens and they are threatened, I can use none of my defenses. I must remain and that could get everyone killed if he loses his temper."*

"I'm sure she would appreciate your concern," Annabeth said, "but don't you think she should have the opportunity to decide for herself if she wants to be there?"

Mizuko flashed Annabeth a smile. *"Which is why I will tell her about it, but will not ask her to be there. She can decide or not for herself. I'll operate as if I am on my own and must hope that if she does show up, Remy does not lose his temper."*

Annabeth chuckled, but then her expression sobered. "I must warn you. If you can sheathe yourself in flames, do not ever do it in front of my kind. Don't even do so much as make flames roll across your fingers, or light a cigarette with your fingertip. Fire triggers an instinctive fear in us, and we will tear apart anyone and everyone, even loved ones, that is in our way when trying to get away from it."

Mizuko looked surprised. *"That is good to know."* She nodded. *"Very good to know, as I can do much more lethal things than that with fire if I've a mind to."* She caught Annabeth's eye. *"The fire thing is new. I had to accept the Contract since fire was the only thing that worked on the creatures that tried to kill me last week. I'd have rather liked mist or fog instead, but that's rather useless to use against something with spikes in their va-jay-jay mouths and a desire to eat brains."*

"Do you realize how, well, off-kilter saying things like that makes you sound?" Annabeth asked.

"No." Mizuko shrugged. *"It's not my fault not everyone sees what I see."*

"It's not what you see, Mizuko," Annabeth said, "but how you say it."

Mizuko just looked back at Annabeth, clearly not getting what she was saying.

"You tend to just blurt things out, without thinking of the effect it might have on the people you're talking to. It can be very disturbing and some people could feel uncomfortable or even threatened by it."

"Sorry?" Mizuko ventured. *"I thought you knew about that."*

"Knew about what? The attack or the way you talk?"

Mizuko smiled. *"It's okay. I know. So, two nights. I should call and ask to meet him here."*

"Do you have an idea of what time you want the meeting to happen?"

*"Early evening is best I think. Maybe eight."*

"Okay. Did you want to use the lounge?"

*"Yes please, if it is available."*

"I think it is," Annabeth said. "If not, I'll work something out for you."

*"I appreciate this, Ms. Milogie."*

Mizuko left the lounge a few minutes later, then took a quick look around the club to fulfill her duty to Ishtar. She soon realized that Pierced Man was following her through the crowds and worse — he had brought two friends with him. She didn't like these odds. In a crowded club there was little she could do that wouldn't either draw unwanted attention to herself or hurt a lot of people around her. She slipped rapidly out of the club after dodging a few attempted passes at her by half-drunk club goers.

Thinking quickly she opened her phone and called for a taxi to pick her up several blocks away. She looked over her shoulder, dashed for a corner and heard the trio rapidly closing. She gathered power into herself and released it quick as a thought, causing her physical form to explode into a gust of wind and autumn leaves. She swirled up into the air as three shaggy wolves tore around the corner. They skidded to a halt, suddenly losing her scent and ran here and there trying to find her as Mizuko grew more distant. Soon, she left them all behind as she drifted high over low buildings and angled toward her pickup point.

The rest of her trip home was blessedly quiet.

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In the latest hours of the night when Glasshouse prepared to close and things were locking up, a passing remark from Annabeth on how smoothly things went evoked a remark from an employee tasked with watching the security monitors.

"Almost was trouble, I think, when those three men started following that girl around the club. But fortunately, whatever they had in mind, they took it outside," the heavyset man told her.

"Can you cue up the footage for me?" she asked.

He said he could do that, then led her back up to the security office. He'd flagged the time and cameras because at the time he was concerned there might be an incident and he was preparing to get the bouncers on it, so it was simple for him to pick up what he was talking about and show Annabeth. It was a little strange seeing Mizuko's Mask. Even as a mortal she was a remarkable looking woman.

Annabeth saw the whole thing from the point Mizuko left the private lounge and watched as Mizuko made

her way from the top floor to the Black Out Lounge, where she stopped, made a slow, careful survey, then left, dodging the three men as she went. The last image of Mizuko had her looking over her shoulder as she stepped out the front doors and left the club. Her expression was calm, collected, and also aware.

The security man backed up the tapes further and looked around until he found video of Mizuko entering the club. It showed Mizuko ducking past the man with the piercings and how she hurried and got into the private lounge before he caught up to her again.

"I want print outs of the frames where we can see the faces of the guys following her," Annabeth said as she copied down the security man's notes. "And copies of the footage you showed me. When you're done, let me know and I'll make sure you're paid for your time. I'll be down at the bar going over some papers."

He nodded. "You want any images of her?"

Annabeth nodded. "The best you can get."

It only took him about twenty minutes to find some shots of the men. They weren't high resolution or anything, and the dim lighting didn't help. But they were clear enough they could be identified on sight. He presented them all in a manilla folder for Annabeth.

"Good work, William," Annabeth said, accepting the folder. "I appreciate you staying after for this." She smiled at him.

The middle-aged man practically glowed with the praise. "You want me to let you know when one of these enters the club again?" Having something to actually look for would help make his job less boring. "I could keep an eye out for that girl, too, if you want." To William, anyone under the age of 35 was a "boy" or a "girl".

"Excellent idea." She kept smiling, reminded again how even just a few kind words of appreciation could affect someone with no cost to oneself at all. "And watch for anything similar that might be going on. I'm concerned that this might be a sign of an emerging trend. Something similar happened at Phaze, and I don't want to be caught unawares." Phaze was another club she owned in Santa Fe. A group of guys were targeting lone women at the club, and while they'd been stopped, she was worried that it might be a tactic spreading to other places.

"You got it." As with most new or cutting edge businesses, a state of the art communication system had been installed at Glasshouse. For the most part, it didn't add any extra complications. Phones worked like phones. Security cameras fed images. But the integrated system meant that depending on your security level, you had access to a lot more. In this case, it meant that William could type out a quick note and the system would route it to Annabeth's phone as a text message, all in a split second. Texts were less obtrusive than constant phone calls, read and understood in a moment when the recipient had time to do so. For things like this, it was much more efficient than email.

When things were quiet at the club, and she was the only one left in the building, Annabeth called Mizuko.

It took four rings, but the phone clicked and Mizuko's voice responded with a sleepy, "Hello?"

"I apologize for waking you up, Mizuko. It's Annabeth." The vampire paused. "I'm glad to hear you're okay."

Mizuko blinked awake. "Is there something wrong? Why wouldn't I be okay?"

"The three guys who were after you in the club," Annabeth said. "I was concerned something might have

happened to you."

"I appreciate your concern," Mizuko said. She wondered if that meant Annabeth thought of her as a friend, or simply an ally she didn't want to lose. "I made sure to leave the club before something happened that would require me to do something unsettling."

"Do you know who they were?"

"Werewolves," Mizuko said matter-of-factly, as if things like being hunted by a pack of werewolves was something she dealt with all the time. "I made a mistake when I was out with Drake last week. How did you know they were following me?"

"One of the security guards who monitors the cameras saw it. When you got out of the club without problems, he didn't bring it to my attention until a short while ago." Annabeth made a mental note to add cameras outside to watch the entrances.

"Oh. Cameras, of course." She held her tongue instead of remarking on seeing little red mechanical eyes blinking at her from time to time. Annabeth told her that remarks like that were disturbing.

"Are you sure you're alright?" Annabeth asked.

"I am, Ms. Milogie. You needn't worry. I will make contact with Remy as we discussed and be there at the club, werewolves or no," Mizuko assured her.

"I'll see you then. Sleep well."

"Yes. And you."

Annabeth looked at the pictures. If they were after Mizuko, they might try again. Annabeth wanted to know who they were. She picked up her phone again. "Beatrice, I need you to make a delivery for me."

—

Rey looked at the large envelope on her desk. It was emblazoned in one corner with the Glasshouse logo, and her name was written on it in a very precise, very elegant script. It had been hand delivered in the very early hours of the morning to the main desk, and was waiting for her when she got in to work.

"Why is someone from Glasshouse sending me something?" she murmured as she carefully slit the envelope open. It contained several pictures, a handwritten note and a business card. A quick glance at the note revealed the papers were from Annabeth Milogie, a friend of both Remy's and Mizuko's. The three men - werewolves in fact - in the pictures had harassed some patrons of the club. Annabeth wondered if she might know who they were.

Rey couldn't help but laugh. Just because she knew some werewolves didn't mean she knew them all. Still, if they were causing trouble.... She picked up her cell phone and dialed Lyla's number.

"Hello Rey," Lyla greeted after the third ring. Her voice was sultry and sensual as it always was.

"Hi, Lyla. How are you this morning?" A million different replies ran through Rey's head, ranging from polite to downright pornographic. She never knew what kind of thing Lyla would say to that question.

"Hungover. Why?"

"I was wondering if we could get together later today. I need your help with something."

"I'm going to need some details," Lyla said.

"Some werewolves have been harassing a friend of mine," Rey said, "and I was hoping you might recognize them. I've got pictures." She paused. "How the heck could you be hungover? What were you drinking?"

"Drinking contest. Absinthe," Lyla said, answering both her questions. "Tell me where they were harassing your friend and I'll tell you if I know the territory."

"She was at the club Glasshouse."

"I don't know where that is, Rey."

After she told Lyla the address, Lyla thought about it a moment, then said, "I don't know of any packs there. If there were wolves in that area, they are either out slumming, or someone has moved in. That's a Mythic address, so we've been a little hindered by your paranoid queen, since I'm the primary scout around here. None of the others are as quick and as quiet as I am and I haven't let them do much in Mythic since I can't see what's there. The Pure aren't something to practice skills on."

Rey didn't say what she really wanted to about the Emerald Queen. "I don't suppose there are any packs in Mythic who might be convinced to talk to me about it?"

"The Mythic packs were badly torn up during the war and we weren't able to contact them unless they came out of the city." Lyla was usually the first contact, the one werewolf that was powerful enough to gain respect, yet mild-mannered enough to not have to fight for it every time a new pack was encountered. Rey was beginning to understand just how crippling it had been to have Lyla banned from the city. Still, Rey knew that lately Lyla had been exploiting a loophole in the Emerald Queen's dictum to enter Mythic during seasons not closely aligned with Spring. "I'm still trying to figure out who is still alive in order to contact them."

"Is there any way I can help?"

"Get your queen to lift the ban. Sooner or later, my pack is going to determine the risks of not allowing us entry will outweigh the risks of war with your kind," Lyla stated.

"That would be difficult," Rey said, "but I'll see what I can do." If Ishtar could be convinced Lyla was no longer a threat - or a threat she would be able to deal with now that she has ascended to her "rightful destiny" - she just might be willing to lift the ban.

"So, the pictures. I need time to sober up. I think I drank enough of that stuff to drop an elephant. Come down to the bar at around six tonight. I'll be there and can take a look and see if I recognize them."

"I'll see you then," Rey replied.

Later, after work, Rey had time to get ready and head down to the biker bar that served as the main social gathering point for the Stormfront pack. Lyla was there shooting pool with a few other pack members, including the young woman she had been training as the next warrior for the Bone Shadows-dominated pack.

"Hi guys," Rey said, hanging her coat and putting her purse on a free table. She smiled and approached the table, taking a look at the people around the table to see who was here. Tonight she was dressed appropriately for the crowd, with her low-riding jeans and tight t-shirt, and while she wasn't a Dancer, she moved with the allure of the Fairest, with just a hint of a hidden predator. The changeling wondered for a moment if they might sense something different about her, that her affinity to her Court's emotion was

stronger, though they might not understand what they sensed. She didn't think they could, but anything was possible. Especially with Lyla, one of the few people who knew her well.

She felt predatory eyes on her as she made her way toward Lyla and she knew that to meet them was to invite whatever lurked there to come out to play. That wasn't something any rational person wanted. The pack's restlessness reminded her how short they were on viable mates.

Lyla straightened up from the table to the sound of balls cracking together and racing around the table. One dropped into a pocket and she moved around the table to line up another shot. "Hello, Rey," she said without looking. The werewolf had already caught her scent. "You can put the photos there." She indicated a tall table occupied only by one glass of half-finished beer.

The changeling put copies of them on the table then casually (she hoped) moved to stand near her friend, making sure she had her back to as few of the werewolves as possible, and not meeting the eyes of any of men. Rey thought she understood, now, part of the reason for Lyla's need to have the pack be able to go into Mythic. But the threat of the Pure moving back into the city, into the vacuum left by the death of the Forsaken who'd claimed that land, was not one they could ignore or let go on forever.

Lyla finished with a dissatisfied frown and let Bear have his turn. She leaned her pool stick against the wall, picked up her beer and took a drink, then glanced at the pictures, spreading them out so she could see them all at once. She shook her head. "I don't know these men. If I were you, I'd be cautious regardless whether they are Pure or Forsaken. Either can be deadly dangerous to you. Either won't hesitate to kill if you become threat or prey. The only things they might hesitate to kill are other werewolves. That would be murder." Her insinuation was that everything else that moved might be considered a prey or enemy and that the wolves would have no compunctions against killing that might otherwise be expected in most people. That was pretty typical of werewolf attitude regardless what faction they were from.

More important was what Lyla wasn't saying. In terms of negotiating with potentially hostile werewolves, regardless what tribes there were, she was telling Rey that if a negotiation was to be held, it had to happen between werewolves.

Rey nodded. "I appreciate the info," she said, glancing down at her fetish ring. "I'm hoping to prevent something ugly from happening. If things end up in a fight, my friend won't hold her punches and wouldn't consider it murder either." The thought of Mizuko fighting with those three werewolves worried her. Her friend really would have no compunction about killing them if they attacked her, and she'd do a lot of damage to them before she fell.

Lyla looked into Rey's face. "Sounds like your friend is pretty tough. If she's that strong, she might be able to handle them. I wouldn't want to try to fight off three werewolves. Been there, done that, didn't end all that well." She smiled at Rey. "But if she's strong enough not to act like prey and has the strength to bloody their noses, that might be all that she has to do to get them to leave her alone. Three wolves, though?" Lyla shook her head seriously. "That won't be easy."

Rey agreed. "And if it goes down somewhere humans can see, she's going to be at a big disadvantage. Hopefully it won't come to that." She didn't make any comment about one particular fight. Everything that needed to be said about it had been said, and Lyla's current pack didn't need to know that story. The changeling's eyes strayed to Lyla's tattoos again, and it reminded her of something she'd wanted to ask. It was perhaps a bit too public a place to be asking, but she didn't want to put it off any longer. Her conversation with Richard about the importance of a changeling's past had got her thinking about it.

"I was wondering if you'd help me learn First Tongue again," Rey said, lowering her voice. She knew that every werewolf here could likely hear her request, but she wanted to at least pretend to want a measure of privacy. "That knowledge was something I had to sacrifice to become what I am, and it's something I want, no, need, to get back."

Lyla smiled. "You get the Queen of Green to drop her ban on me, and I'll give you what you want."

Rey fought the impulse to bind Lyla to her word. "You're lucky we're friends," she said seriously, "otherwise I'd put power to that promise." Behind Lyla, Rey saw a few of her wisps buzzing around her friend as if angry at not binding Lyla into a pledge.

"Put anything you like into it," dared Lyla. "I only said I'd give you what you want, not everything you want." She smiled with cunning. "My word, my choice. If I think you've earned the right to speak the original tongue, I'll teach you. Otherwise, you'll have something else I know you want.

"Have you forgotten who I bargain with, my friend? I'm quite familiar with how to bind both spirits and mortals with word and magic. We are Bone Shadows."

"I haven't forgotten, Lyla." Rey hoped she was able to hide the pain her friend's words had caused her. Until she'd talked to Richard about her past, she'd thought it had been better to leave it all behind. A big part of what she'd been able to do, what she was, was lost to her forever. Lyla's mentioning it was like putting salt in the wound, though she hoped her friend hadn't done it intentionally.

She held the werewolf's gaze for a moment longer, then looked at the photos. "Should I leave those with you?"

Lyla nodded. "I'll show them around in case anyone else has seen these three."

"Appreciate it." Rey retrieved her jacket and purse, then turned to look back at Lyla and Kim. She considered telling them, warning them about making deals and offers to her kind. She opened her mouth to pass on the information, but instead said "See you around." The changeling slipped her arms into her jacket and sauntered.

When she reached the door, she hesitated. "I'd have worked to get the ban lifted, Lyla," Rey said, her voice almost a whisper, "and done it for nothing because we're friends." Rey 's voice dropped to almost a whisper, but she knew Lyla could hear every word. "Don't insult me by dangling what you think is a juicy carrot in front of me."

"Juicy carrot?" Lyla said loud enough to get the whole bar's attention. "You want something from me, Rey. I want something from you. If friends can't trade without one of them getting pissy, what are we?" Lyla said, "Maybe you would have done it anyway. But maybe far too late. It's nearly been a year already since you've been back and more than that since the end of the war. If these guys are Pure, we can't afford to wait for you to get around to it. Even if they aren't Pure. I need it done or we're going in anyway, war with your kind or not. I'll wait, but not much more than a few weeks."

Lyla watched her from across the room.

"That's your choice, Lyla," Rey replied calmly. "I'll be in touch."

Mizuko was ready to make the call to Remy the next night, after she finished putting in a few hours at Corazon. Amber was in arm's reach as she made the call. During the day, she'd spoken with Amber, telling her everything about her relationship with Remy even including the things they'd shared. It helped Mizuko figure out some things she was still having trouble with.

There had been a lot more positives in the relationship with Remy than there were negatives. The issue was



that Mizuko wanted a deeper relationship than what she currently had. Mizuko could tell that Amber was more of a mind that person should date around while they were young before getting serious. But then, Amber was a little bit the vagabond. Amber told her she understood why Remy was upset when Mizuko pushed him about his feelings toward her, but she didn't envy Mizuko having to tell Remy to his face that she wanted a more serious relationship and that it would be with someone else. Amber told her that doing this face to face was pretty gutsy and that if this is how it going to go, then Mizuko needed to be very careful with Remy's feelings.

The first thing that Amber asked was what she was going to do if Remy decided not to get mad, but simply to take control. Mizuko was going to have to be far stronger than she'd ever been if she was going to deliberately resist his charm. And that was just attraction — what if Remy really did have powers he could call on as well? He'd never used them on her before, but if he really didn't want her to go to someone else, he could be tempted to use them on her.

That Amber didn't have all that much confidence in Mizuko's social skills didn't surprise the nymph. It did surprise her when Amber told her that handling someone who might have more feelings invested here than she realized was totally different than handling nasty bugs who wanted to eat her brains. It took some explaining, but what Mizuko finally got was that Amber was concerned because defending yourself from a person you care about — even love — was very different from defending yourself from monsters. To Mizuko, Remy wasn't a monster. Would she really be ready to defend herself with everything she had should he lose control and attack her? Mizuko assured her as she had assured Annabeth that she could more than defend herself, but inside, Mizuko wondered if that was really true.

With those uncertainties still fresh in her mind, she made the phone call to Remy.

"Good evening, *ma petite*." In the background, Mizuko could hear soft music and the murmurings of female voices.

Curiosity caused Mizuko to strain to hear what the voices might be saying. "Hi Remy," she said softly. She had decided against making an attempt at smalltalk. Such attempts to sound more human-like seemed like too much of an effort to manage right now. "I was hoping you might have time to meet with me. Are you available tomorrow night around nine?"

"I'm afraid not. The earliest I can meet with you 11:30."

"That would be fine. Is Glasshouse okay?"

"That is acceptable. I'll see you there."

"Okay." Mizuko hung up and nodded to Amber. It was on. Next she called Annabeth and left a message indicating the time she expected to meet Remy at the club.

Finally, she called Rey.

"Hello?" Rey said, talking through a yawn.

"I'm meeting him at 11:30 on Thursday," Mizuko said without preamble. "I expect to face him on my own, but you wanted to know when."

"Where?" Rey asked.

Mizuko spoke with concern. "Glasshouse. But Rey, I know I'm not good at this sort of thing. Social stuff. If I make a mess of things, I really would not like to know you got caught up in it. I got myself into this and I'll get through it. I wouldn't want you to get hurt because you were trying to help me."

"You're my friend, Mizuko, and part of my motley," Rey said. "And friends help each other through whatever they're going through."

"Do you remember last summer when I got beat up by that gang?"

"Yes."

Mizuko hated to say it this way but she needed Rey to understand. "That happened because I couldn't just leave those girls. They couldn't defend themselves, but I could, so it was better they target me than them. It was my job. But if I didn't have to worry about them, I wouldn't have gotten hurt. I'd have just left." It was a little more complicated than that, of course. She'd also been hampered because she hadn't wanted to call upon her magic in view of mortals. Thursday night, she wouldn't have that problem, but her message was clear enough. If she blew it, she'd sacrifice her own safety to make certain Rey didn't become a target, and that might be exactly what Rey was trying to avoid.

"You don't need to worry about me," Rey said.

"Good," Mizuko said, thinking Rey was going to stay safe. "You don't need to worry about me, either. I'll call you after the meeting."

When the call was over, Rey texted a simple message to Richard "Mizuko & Remy, 11:30 pm Thursday @ Glasshouse."

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*Thursday, 23rd of February 2012*

Mizuko arrived at the club a half hour early and was immediately recognized by the doorman who smiled and let her inside. She once again made a slow sweep of the club, starting with the Blackout Lounge and working her way up. It took her the full thirty minutes because she allowed herself to be distracted in the Blackout Lounge. She had to admit to herself that it wasn't the very interesting activities going on in a few of the darkest nooks but rather some trepidation that she might run into werewolves again. It turned out her concern was unwarranted. For now, there was no sign of Metal Face and his buddies.

Around 11:30 (it was approximate since she didn't have a handy way to tell the time) she found herself at the door to the second floor private lounge. She tugged at the charming satiny dress in a subdued silvery color with black vines she wore. It was held by a single, broad strap over one shoulder so that it was held up mostly by clinging to her torso. She'd chosen it because it was pretty but wouldn't stand out among the more ostentatious club wear many other patrons were sporting. Her neck and fingers bore no jewelry.

Mizuko noticed a familiar floral scent a split second before she heard "Keep pulling on that dress and it'll come off." Mizuko turned around and was surprised to see her friend.

Rey's long hair was in a complicated-looking hairdo, pulled back from her face with some of it piled on the top of her head and the rest cascading down her back. The top of her halter dress was little more than two wide strips of fabric that clung to her skin, baring her torso from her collar bone to just below her pierced navel and was held together by four clasps spaced evenly between her breasts. The dress stopped half-way down her thighs, and the fabric's dark color made Rey's flesh look sumptuous, like a fruit just waiting to be tasted.

Mizuko frowned at Rey. "*You weren't supposed to be here.*"

"And I told you not to worry about me." Rey was calm and composed, though a little smile curved her lips.

"I told you the same thing," Mizuko pointed out. "I guess neither of us listen very well." Her hands fidgeted and her nerves frayed. She wasn't entirely sure what she wanted. She thought she wanted to date Drake, but was it worth the danger she could be putting her friend in? She cared about Remy and just because she wanted a little more, did she have the right to do something that could threaten Rey's life.

Mizuko paled visibly, which was impressive under the dim lights of the club. "I can't do this," she said. "It's a mistake. This is about more than just me now." She tried to move past Rey.

Rey moved to block her friend's path. "No, Mizuko. You have to talk to Remy. It's not fair to you, Remy or Drake to leave things as they are." She reached out and placed a hand on Mizuko's shoulder. "I came to give you moral support, not to get into a fight. If you don't want me in that room when you're talking with him, then I'll stay out here."

"Promise me you'll stay out here and you won't come in or interfere in any way unless I call for help."

"I promise not to get involved unless I think I have no other choice," Rey said.

Mizuko folded her arms stubbornly. She knew Rey didn't like Remy and didn't trust for one minute that Rey wouldn't come running in whenever she felt like it. "This isn't a negotiation. This is my life. Besides, I have something a lot more important I'd like you to do than stand around here waiting the Sword of Damocles to fall."

"I know this is your life, Mizuko. I trust in you and believe you can defend yourself should the crap hit the fan in there. I promise I won't get involved in the conversation unless invited. I promise I won't come in if there's yelling or screaming, or even if I hear furniture breaking, but if all heck breaks loose and you need help but can't call for it, I have to help you. You're my friend. Family. Please don't ask me to promise not help if things go really bad in there."

Mizuko nodded, satisfied. She smiled. "Okay. Now, if you'd like to keep busy I do have something important for you to do. There are some werewolves who've been giving me a hard time. I spent a half hour looking for them, and I don't think they are here right now, but they could show up. I'm not sure what they want, but they've been bothering me, even chased me once." She gave Rey a description of Metal Face and his friends. "If you see them in here, please call me so I know to use an alternate exit."

Rey nodded. She didn't need the descriptions as she had the photographs, but she didn't mention it to her friend. "Will do."

"You look good tonight," Mizuko said to her friend. Then she turned and before she had any further doubts, she opened the door and went inside.

Annabeth and Remy were already there, and Remy stood as soon as Mizuko walked into the room. Both vampires were relaxed, and Annabeth had a curious expression on her face. "Who was that you were talking to," she asked, having seen Rey through the doorway before it closed behind Mizuko.

"My friend, Rey," Mizuko said, wondering how much the vampires could hear through the door. Did they have supernatural hearing? They had powers, so maybe some did and some didn't. There wasn't any way for her to know. "I was surprised she was here."

She crossed the room and hugged Remy. He returned the hug after a moment's hesitation.

"That was Miss Lafitte?" Mizuko could see the speculation on Annabeth's face. "Her appearance is surprising. Not like you at all."

Mizuko didn't see why that was surprising, but she didn't think very hard on it. If she had she'd have realized that she, as an elemental carefully sculpted to look as she did, and Rey, a beast formed of her own circumstances, looked as different from each other as night and day in spite of the fact they were both fae. The nymph was entirely focused on what she'd come to do.

*"I'm glad you came," she told Remy. Then she told him exactly what was on her mind. "I love you, Remy. But I want more than you can give right now. So, I want to date someone else. If I do that, he said he doesn't want me to have sex with you anymore. I don't know if dating him will work out but I want to try and that's one of the conditions. Nothing else need change between you and I, and certainly not between your coterie and I... if you are able to live with this."*

She nervously watched his face, trying to gauge his reaction.

"What is it you want that you seem to think I cannot give you?" His face was dispassionate, but his eyes held hers like a vice.

*"Answers to questions you cannot give but which anger you. There are things you will not do for me: To let me be a part of your life. To let me worry about what danger I may or may not face from your world. To allow yourself to love."*

*"I think you refuse to allow yourself these things because you believe it makes you vulnerable or weak. I disagree, but I cannot prove it to you. I only know that because you deny these things to yourself, you deny them to me."*

"If you are looking for love," Remy said after a moment, "then you will have to look elsewhere. My kind is not capable of such an emotion. Obsession. Lust, most certainly, but not anything so romantic. I am... fond of you, but it will never be any more than that."

Mizuko shrugged. She let the soothing calm of her voice flow from her and fill the room. *"If you can feel real anger, that is an emotion. Do you really think you can pick and choose what emotions you feel? Or are you really simply burying them along with your mortal life? I can reach out and sense emotions in your kind if I want to. I agree they are... paler than human, but that doesn't make them unreal. I don't want to argue with you, though. Our opinions are different."*

*"I wanted to tell you my intentions in person. I know this topic has enraged you before and I wanted to give you an opportunity to express yourself if you wanted to. But if you are okay with me doing this, then I am satisfied, as well. I have treasured our intimacy but I would like to look elsewhere, at least for a time. I do not wish to give up anything else. I want to honor all obligations and respect our friendships. Are you okay with this?"*

Remy casually closed the distance between them, took Mizuko's hand in his. "I am satisfied," he said, before brushing her knuckles with a kiss.

Mizuko's eyes lit up. Some of that was the magic of the Pledge, but it was also happiness. *"I'm glad you took time tonight. Now, it seems Rey has brought herself here tonight and I know you have been curious about her."* Her eyes looked to Annabeth as well and she smiled a little. *"Both of you. If you want, I could ask her in so you can meet her."*

"I would like that," Annabeth said immediately.

Remy nodded. "It would be nice to speak with Miss Lafitte outside of an office again."

Mizuko bowed her head, then went to the door. She opened it and looked for Rey. She was off to one side, surrounded by young men. Her back to the railing so she could keep an eye on the door to the private

lounge. When she saw Mizuko, she tilted her head and raised an eyebrow.

She signed, "It went well. Would you like to meet them?"

Rey replied yes with a quick, almost negligent hand gesture, and began the process of gently shedding her admirers. One of them, a husky, almost muscular guy in tight latex pants, began to protest loudly, but she stilled his voice with a gently finger on his lips. She said something to him, causing them all to laugh and the protester to flush and smile.

When she was finally free of them, Rey walked with all the seductive movements of a woman knowing she's being watched. "Who's there?" she asked quickly in sign.

"Two friendly vampires," Mizuko signed. She was staring at the men that Rey appeared to have been socializing with but she didn't say anything. She let Rey inside, then closed the door again.

The nymph brought Rey over to their hostess and Remy. "*Rey Lafitte, this is Annabeth Milogie. You know Remy, of course.*"

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Ms. Milogie," Rey said, extending her hand.

"Please, call me Annabeth," the vampire replied, shaking Rey's hand. When Annabeth took a step backward, her eyes stayed on Rey, or rather the wisps that were dancing around the Fairest. One of them floated over to hover six inches from her nose, before darting back as if to hide in Rey's hair.

Rey turned to Remy. "It's good to see you again, Remy." She extended her hand to him, which he took and pressed a quick kiss to her fingertips.

"Always a delight, Miss Lafitte. Ah, Rey." He ducked his head slightly. "Old habits die hard," he said with a charming, inviting smile.

Mizuko was quiet, her head tilted curiously as she watched.

Rey saw her friend's reaction. "What is it?"

Mizuko shook her head and shrugged, then shifted her stance. "*Annabeth says we are not alike at all.*"

Rey chuckled. "We're not."

Mizuko's lips formed a little smile. She looked among them all and said, "*I'll let you all be. Good night.*"

Rey looked at her friend for a moment, then said "I ought to be heading out myself. It was nice to meet you, Annabeth, and I hope to see you both here at the club another night."

Remy and Annabeth both said their goodbyes, then the two Changelings returned to main part of the club. The gaggle of young men who'd been flirting with Rey were still there, and they came to attention when they saw her, but their eyes fell on Mizuko and stayed there. Rey fought back a surge of annoyance when she smiled at them, knowing they'd completely forgotten about her now that Mizuko had appeared.

Mizuko didn't seem to notice them. She signed, "I need to use the restroom. I'll be back in a minute."

"I'll be here," Rey replied as Mizuko looked around, found a sign and headed to the women's room.

The guys immediately flocked around Rey, encircling her as they had before.

The club's restroom was a busy place. Mizuko had to wait for a stall to become free, so she folded her arms, leaned against the sink and tried not to be impatient. That was when she noticed something moving in the mirror out of the corner of her eye.

She turned to face it and saw herself smiling deviously back at her. The mirror-Mizuko signed, "You could fix him, you know. Then you could have both Drake and Remy if you wanted."

"*What?*" Mizuko said out loud.

The girl standing at the next sink and using the mirror next to her to reapply some makeup looked at Mizuko. "I didn't say nothing," she told the nymph.

The mirror-Mizuko signed, "You could buy him a heart. At the market. Mortals are always making wishes about love, after all. They want this or that person. Or they want to not feel the pain of heartbreak anymore and they bargain their heart away. You can buy that and give it to him. Then he could feel love the way you do."

Mizuko stared at her mirror-self, her lips parted as she thought about it. "*How much do you think it would cost?*"

The girl next to her looked around, trying to figure out who Mizuko was talking to, then decided to move down to the next sink.

"How would I know? I'm you," her mirror-self signed. "What we do know for sure is that spring is just around the corner and that's when these kinds of things really go on sale."

Mizuko thought about that while her mirror-self's smile grew wider and more wolfish.

"Mizuko. Mizuko!" The nymph was startled out of her thoughts to see Rey in the arms of two of her admirer's, who'd caught her to keep her from falling.

"What wrong with you?" A tall, dark-skinned man in a white t-shirt and black pants demanded. "You nearly ran your friend down."

Rey stared at Mizuko, trying to read her face as she moved to stand, the two guys helping her somewhat reluctant to let go.

Mizuko backed away, looking at the group with a little bewilderment. "*Sorry,*" she muttered. She turned abruptly and hurried toward the stairs down to the ground floor.

A moment later, Rey stepped in front of Mizuko and signed "Are you okay?"

Mizuko nodded. "I imagine things sometimes," Mizuko signed. "I got distracted. That's all." She looked over at the bar. A drink seemed like a nice idea right now.

"What was it this time?" Rey asked. She was both curious and concerned, because the look on her friend's face had been one of someone plotting something bad, perhaps even malicious.

They checked IDs here when alcohol was purchased so Mizuko signed, "Buy me a drink?"

"If you'll answer the question I just asked you." Rey leaned against the bar and waited, ignoring the looks they were getting. He got her order on his next pass. Mizuko wasn't picky, leaving it up to Rey.

They found a pair of stools since it seemed like Mizuko wanted to sit down. The nymph picked up the Bad

Girl and took a drink, then put down the glass so she could sign. "It occurred to me while I was in the women's room that I could fix him if I wanted to."

"Fix him?" Rey didn't really like the sound of that.

"Remy told me that he couldn't really feel love. I found that hard to believe because it's an emotion and I've seen him have other emotions. Whether it's true or not doesn't really matter, though, if I wanted to fix it for him. Anything can be bought at the Goblin Market and love is a very common commodity — especially in spring. I know it isn't right to think about that. It isn't fair to Remy and not Drake, either. But I couldn't help imagining how things might be different if I had done it instead of asking to end the relationship."

"He probably meant he couldn't feel the kind of love you wanted," Rey said, picking up her glass of water. "His kind do feel emotions, but they're weak. Faded. And you're right. It's not a good idea to mess with someone like that. But you know what? If he really did love you, and wanted to be with you, he wouldn't have given you up without a fight. Now, I know you might think I'm saying this because I don't exactly like Remy's people, but I think you've got a much better chance at a relationship with Drake than with Remy. Drake certainly treats you better."

A little smile slowly pulled at the corners of her mouth. She nodded. "He does. I really want it to work with him."

"Then go for it. Step away from Remy. Leave it in the past with no regrets and fond memories, and move forward with Drake."

Shortly, another drink arrived. The bartender set a tall, frothy-looking drink in front of her, but a waitress also stopped. She said that a gentleman that bought her the drink also wanted her to have this. She gave Rey a folded piece of paper that, when she opened it up, read, "Read your texts."

Mizuko was curious. "What is it?"

When Rey pulled her phone out she realized she must have missed the notifications in all the noise of the club, but there were a couple texts from Richard. One was asking how things went, and the other was to tell her he was across the bar in the lounge if she wanted to join him. Rey's face lit up with a smile, and she snagged the bartender's attention for a moment, long enough to ask what the drink was. He told her it was a Slippery Nipple.

"The drink and note were from Richard," Rey said, tucking her phone and the note back into her purse. "I mentioned to him I was going to be here, but I didn't expect him to be here. He normally works nights. If you'd like me to stick with you, though, I will."

Mizuko shook her head. "I'm boring," she signed. "He's not. Go have fun. I'm going home after I finish this drink anyway."

"You sure?" Rey said, searching Mizuko's face.

Mizuko nodded.

Rey slipped off her stool and gave Mizuko a quick hug. "I'm very proud of you, Mizuko," she said into her friend's ear. "What you did tonight took a lot of courage." She took a step back and picked up her drink. "I'll talk to you tomorrow."

Rey made her way across the club, slipping around dancers near the edge of the floor and avoiding "helpful" hands. The closer she got to the entrance of the lounge, the more alluring her movements became. She couldn't help it. She'd dressed to catch a man's eye and keep it. While she may be completely committed to Richard, that didn't mean she didn't enjoy being admired by other men.

Mizuko thought about Drake, then decided to finish her drink. It wasn't small and she wasn't good at chugging things but she tried to drink it down quickly.

"Careful," said a male voice near her ear. "You'll choke if you drink that too fast."

She did choke, but it was because she started. She hadn't noticed anyone walking up to her. But then, she usually tried to ignore people at clubs because they often were looking at her and she didn't want to encourage them by acknowledging it. She set the drink down hastily and tried not to cough, covering her mouth with the back of her hand.

"I'm terribly sorry."

She looked up at the face of the man speaking to her. He had a strong jaw and a mature face but fine features. His eyes were on the grey side of blue. He wore a blue silk shirt and slacks with expensive shoes — a grown-up version of club wear. His hair was long, but stopped just short of his shoulders and had the look of a well-tended, expensive cut.

"I didn't mean to startle you." He presented her with a little napkin you can find at bars. She took it and dabbed at her lips.

Mizuko smiled to let him know she wasn't upset, and nodded to acknowledge his gesture. But then she turned away to let him know she wasn't interested in company.

There was a slight, silky rustle and Mizuko sensed the man take Rey's seat. He set down a partly-filled glass of something Mizuko's nose told her was probably brandy or cognac. She went back to drinking her Bad Girl.

"My name's Xavier. Are you hear alone?" he asked.

She stopped and turned to stare at him. He was a good looking man and in other circumstances, she might have been inclined to play along. Now was not the time.

He raised an eyebrow at her. "Don't talk much, do you? It's all right, but there is a problem, isn't there. You have a boyfriend."

Mizuko nodded.

"I thought so. That's good." He smiled charmingly and nodded. "That's really good." He leaned toward her and it made Mizuko want to shrink away, but she refused to give ground. He stopped when his face was very close to hers. "I'd like you to do something for me."

Mizuko was looking at his eyes when they locked onto hers. She couldn't help but listen to every word.

"I work for a private tourism company and we are studying local trends of active young people. It would really help us a lot if you could call or text us at this number with a description of what places you expect to go the next time you go out with a friend." He smiled. "Or boyfriend." He then put a card in her hand. She took it without shifting her eyes away from his. "Do you understand?"

Though her face was blank, her lips parted slackly, Mizuko nodded.



He leaned back and broke contact with his eyes. He patted her hand. "That's good. Well done."

Mizuko blinked and looked at him and then around the bar. She couldn't remember what they had just been talking about and she felt very embarrassed. This was the second time tonight she had lost track of what she was doing and where she was. It scared the hell out of her. She stood up to leave.

"You haven't finished your drink," Xavier pointed out.

Mizuko wore a unsteady, embarrassed smile, then gulped down the last of it. She put it down a little too quickly, nodded again at him and then hurried away.

Xavier knit his fingers together and rested his chin upon them while he watched her weave her way through the crowd and out the door. He was smiling.

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Unable to do anything about her lapses in attention, Mizuko focused on the positive results of the night. She started walking to the bus stop several blocks away and since she didn't notice the three men who came out of alley way and begin to follow her, she wasn't upset by it. Smiling happily to herself, she got her phone out and called Drake.

"Hello, Mizuko." It didn't take much for Mizuko to hear the pleasure in Drake's voice. "How are you?"

*"I am so much better now! I wanted to tell you that --"*

Just then a car beeped at her and some young men whistled at her as they drove by. *"Sorry. That I broke things off with Remy. How are you?"*

"I'm fine. How did it go?" His words were tinged with concern.

*"Really well. He wasn't upset about it."* She swerved to avoid a puddle and kept walking. At some point in the evening it must have sprinkled. *"So, I'm free... you know, whenever."* She said awkwardly.

"That's great to hear," he said with relief. "Unfortunately, not tonight. I've got to finish grading papers, and an eight o'clock class in the morning." He paused for a moment. "How about the day after tomorrow? Dinner and a movie?"

*"Yes, I would like that. It's too late tonight — I just wanted to hear your voice. What is your favorite place for dinner so I know how to dress?"*

"How about the Pipe & Fiddle again? It's pretty casual, and there's a theater a couple blocks away."

*"Okay, then it's a date. Saturday."*

"I'm looking forward to it. I can pick you up if you like, say 4:30?"

*"I'd like that,"* she said warmly, imagining him doing so literally.

A bus roared and squeaked to a stop and she shuffled up the steps.

"Ma'am, you can't bring those dogs on here."

*"What dogs? I don't have a dog."* Werewolves! A wave of panic hit her just then and she whirled, looking

around but she caught sight only of shadows disappearing around parked cars down the street.

The driver frowned down at her. "My mistake. I thought those were yours."

Mizuko dropped her fare into his jar and headed toward the back of the bus where she dropped into a seat and tried not to shake. She hadn't seen them this time. They could have jumped her and she would never have seen it coming. She closed her eyes and tried to get control of her breathing.

"Mizuko? Are you okay?" Drake's voice came from the phone. He'd heard what happened and was worried.

"Yes. *I think I'm attracting more attention than I meant to,*" she admitted. She laughed nervously. "*Now, it's apparently dogs, too. I might be just about the unluckiest person in the world to be around.*"

"Why would dogs be following you?"

"*I doubt they were dogs, Drake,*" she said with calm that surprised her. "*More likely they were werewolves. It wouldn't be the first time they followed me since last week. Next time a weird, supernaturally powerful person asks me to dance, I'll swallow my pride and just do it.*"

"Where are you," he replied immediately. "I'll come and get you and drive you home."

"*No, don't do that. I'm on the bus for to Santa Fe. I'll be fine from here.*" She liked that he offered, though, and it showed in the warmth of her voice. She did spare a glance over her shoulder, out the back window of the bus to look for any sign of Metal Face and his Furry Friends, but she didn't see any. That preserved her good mood.

"I'll meet you at the bus station, then."

It was the second time he offered to come for her and although she felt guilty for making him worry, she couldn't say no. After a thoughtful pause, Mizuko replied, "*Okay. I will see you there.*"

She closed the phone and for the rest of the ride to the Santa Fe station she kept looking for whoever might be following. She didn't catch sight of anything suspicious but she couldn't shake a prickly feeling of being watched. Her Witch's Gaze was only useful out to several yards, which meant it would be useless in trying to detect something that was following at any reasonable distance, and the power of Kenning, a changeling's ability to detect the supernatural without resorting to a spell like Witch's Gaze, required greater clarity of mind and thought than she could muster.

When she stepped off the bus and onto the sidewalk, she flinched visibly at the fast-moving shadow of a car as it crossed another car's headlights. She nervously looked around for a place to wait for Drake. There were several benches, but a couple of them were occupied; one by an elderly homeless woman who was busy making a blanket of newspaper, and another taken up by a glassy-eyed, teenage girl and boy dressed in grungy street clothes who were more interested each other than the world around them.

Mizuko chose the unoccupied one and plopped down with another nervous look around the station. Then she flipped open her phone and quickly fired off a text to the number Xavier gave her saying she was going to the Pipe & Fiddle with her boyfriend for dinner Saturday evening and then up the street to take in a movie.

The homeless woman hadn't finished making her "bed" when Mizuko heard Drake calling her name. She saw him at the closest exit, wearing his duster over jeans and a MCSU sweatshirt.

She stood and hurried over to him. "I'm so sorry," she signed, trying to apologize for making him come out so late.

"No need to apologize," he signed back as his eyes scanned her from head to foot. "Your place or mine?" he asked.

She stood up straighter, posing a little. She liked his eyes on her, even if he was just checking to make sure she wasn't hurt. The idea of going to his place intrigued her but she felt like she had already imposed on him. "I don't know," she signed hesitantly. "I suppose if you dropped me near my place I could use the Gate there to find my way somewhere those werewolves can't reach, if they happen to still be following somehow."

"Would you feel safer if you were with someone?"

Mizuko nodded and thought about that. She signed, "I'm probably only paranoid, but I felt like someone was watching me on the way here. If it isn't just paranoia, then Amber wouldn't be much help against curious werewolves. But I created an elemental to watch over my hollow. Her name is Rhonwen. Maybe I could awaken her for an hour or two until the jitters go away."

"I meant, would you like *me* to stay with you," Drake asked with a little smile.

Mizuko's mouth parted in on "Oh". She nodded her head again and then signed, "Yes please. Forget that bit about the hollow. I would rather stay with you."

"And would you rather do it at your place, or at mine?"

She decided to leave aside being shy. "Yours."

Drake smiled and extended his hand to take hers, but stopped. "Did you want to stop by your place to grab some clothes for tomorrow, or shall we go straight to my place?"

Mizuko thought about it but still couldn't shake the feeling someone's eyes were on her. She figured it was her nerves. She'd gotten overly stressed about breaking things off with Remy and had lost track of where she was and what she was doing *twice*. Then she was followed around by wolves and now she was jittery as hell. If her gut was right on this one, and it usually was about things like this, if she went to her house that might be leading whatever was following her right to Amber, who, as a mortal, had no chance to defend herself against an attack. At least with Drake, he could take care of himself. She'd seen that in the Hedge.

She signed, "I've had a stressful night, so maybe I'm just jumpy, but I still feel like I'm being watched. I don't want to lead it to Amber. If something follows us to your place, then I'm very sorry but I know you and I can defend ourselves much better than she can."

"Then *Casa Mari* it is." Drake held out his hand again, offering it to Mizuko. She took it happily and they made their way to Drake's car.