

*January 29, 2012*

Rey sipped a glass of wine while looking at the menu. She was meeting Mizuko for an early supper at a small bistro in walking distance of her friend's apartment. The smile on her face was heartfelt, and there was a deep sense of happiness in her. Richard had a rare evening off, and didn't have to leave until after lunch this afternoon. They'd made the most of their time together, getting to know each other better both physically and intellectually. She'd gotten a few episodes of the original Avengers series through Netflix and they'd watched them together so Richard could see who Emma Peel was. Afterward, he'd demonstrated exactly how much sexier he found Rey.

Mizuko had walked in and watched Rey smiling to herself for a minute before she came to the table and sat down. When Rey looked up, she smiled and signed, "You seem to be having a good day."

"It's kind of obvious isn't it," Rey said as she put her glass down, then continued to speak in sign. "Richard was able to spend the night last night, and he didn't have to be back at work until early this afternoon. How are you doing?"

Mizuko gave her a knowing smile before answering. "It's been a rough week, but you know that. I made Remy pretty angry with me last night. I regard it as a good thing because at least I know there is emotion there. He'll either remain angry or not." There was a satisfied curl to her lip as she picked up a menu.

"What happened?"

She put the menu back down so she could use her hands. "I sort of cheated on him, then told him about it, then asked him if he cared. More or less. He got very upset that I would ask if he cared about me and stalked off in a rage, but I heard the words. He said he'd been caring for me. So, he cares. I left things there and asked Carson to extend my apologies to him and tell him I will be true to him. I think Carson will do that for me. Unless he's afraid Remy might beat his ass, I suppose."

"I hate to break it to you," Rey signed, "but there's a big difference between caring for and caring about."

Mizuko disagreed. "You don't care for someone you don't care about."

You do if you want something from them, Rey thought silently, then signed "I wonder why he got so angry when you asked him. It's a pretty simple question."

"I don't think he's had to admit feelings for anyone before," Mizuko signed. "Carson told me he's never seen a woman ever make him that angry before. Do you think he might be confused about me? Because I offered him wealth, power and influence enough to help make him a King of Vampires a while ago and he turned it down. He knows I can get information he needs and I've given him favors that he could call upon to get what he wanted from me, within reason. Do you know, the only thing he's ever really asked of me was to talk to a glass of water? Talking to water is so simple to me that it's hardly more difficult than breathing. What he said to me last night made me think about these things. It's true. He's hardly ever asked anything of me even though I've made it clear to him what he could gain. Instead, he treats me like I was a princess and practically gives me an ivory tower. He even said he's not been with another woman like he's been with me since we met. He said these things when he was angry with me and I know them to be true. He may not have said directly that he cares for me, but I believe it to be true now. So, unless he decides to never speak to me again, things are good."

Rey was more than a little taken aback by what Mizuko had just told her. Was all this true? She knew Mizuko would never outright lie to her, but it seemed incredible. The Fairest brought her mind back to the question her friend asked. "Could he be confused? It might be caution. What would you think if someone offered you your heart's desire with no apparent strings attached?"

"I never told him there wouldn't be strings attached, but he never went so far as to ask what exactly they might be. He was very polite, of course, but turned me down because he wanted to succeed on his own merit. I respect that, so I didn't push him on it. Though I have later offered him other help from time to time when it seemed I might have the ability to do so. As I said, the only time he asked was in exchange for a small favor. And by the way, talking to that glass of water rather worked to our own benefit, not Remy's. It pointed out the vampire who had set you in his sights and motivated me to tell your werewolf friends about it."

"So that's how you found out about it. And Remy provided information about his location?"

Mizuko nodded. "Does this place have a waitress? I'm ready to order this southwestern sandwich thing."

"She'll be along any minute," Rey signed. "I hear Sissy's been making a nuisance of herself lately." Her hand movements were casual, but she was watching Mizuko carefully.

"Not as far as I know," Mizuko returned. "I haven't seen her around really at all."

"She's the one who told the queen about you and Remy."

Mizuko sighed. "That explains why the Queen had been given the impression I was having sex with a crowd of vampires. Flock. Murder? I don't know what you call a group of vampires. Anyway, she seemed to have the impression I was being passed around like a whore or something. We worked it out, but I had wondered how she'd gotten that impression. Stupid darkling. Sissy. I mean stupid darkling Sissy, not our Queen."

"Sissy's not exactly your biggest fan."

"I don't exactly have fans," Mizuko pointed out.

Rey chuckled. "Perhaps." Her demeanor became serious once more. "Veridia was really worried about what was going on with you."

"I could tell right away when she summoned me and grilled me about it," Mizuko remarked. She studied Rey a moment. "You can relax. It's okay. It worked out."

"For now," Rey had to add. "I'd like to think what I told her helped in her decision. Her phone call wasn't exactly what I expected to get."

Mizuko sighed. "Has she asked you to spy on me, too?"

"No." Rey shook her head. "She asked me if I thought you were under Remy's control, and what I thought of him."

"What do you think of him?"

"I don't know him very well, but I trust him not to harm you, and he has a personal code of honor that guides his actions."

Mizuko nodded. "And do you think I'm under his control? I'm not asking what you told the Queen. I'm asking what you think."

"I don't think you're any more under his control than I am Richard's, but I'm worried that might change."

"How do you mean?"

"Exactly that. That he'll get some kind of greater influence over you. Some kind of power over you and your loyalties change, and before you know it it's too late to do anything but watch for the headman's axe."

"How is it different from you and your werewolf friends?" She paused, realizing she was a lot closer to her vampire friends than Rey seemed to be with her werewolf friends, and that answered her own question.

"Never mind. I can guess. In any case, I wouldn't turn on my people." She signed the last with a posture of confidence. "If they tried to force me into something I don't like, I'd simply leave."

For the sake of not estranging her friend, Rey let it go. "From the way you were talking to Carson on Thursday, it sounded like he's bound with you in a pledge. Is it the same as the partial ensorcellment you have on Remy?"

"Propriety during the meeting with Queen Veridia forced an end to that pledge," Mizuko responded. She hesitated, then cautiously signed, "She ordered me to offer them a new pledge, one they could all take if they wanted to. I don't know that Veridia really wants me to talk about it."

"Did she tell you not to say anything to anyone about it?"

"No," Mizuko admitted. "Okay. She knew I had an ensorcellment pledge with Remy, so that he could see me as I truly am in exchange for keeping my secrets. Veridia wanted them to know who they were dealing with, so she ordered me to offer the same pledge to Remy and all his friends that were willing to make the promise to keep our secrets. What she did not know was that the ensorcellment pledge wasn't the typical one. I'd... added some things to it. Well. She knows now."

"I take it she wasn't very pleased to find that out. What did you add to it?" Rey's pledgesmith training made her interested in what her friend had done.

"I'd woven in a symbol of the promise Remy and I had made to each other. While the ensorcellments was balanced by swearing to keep each other's secrets, I added something else. That is, when we first saw each other in an evening, he would give me a kiss. The kiss of course was the task I'd set forth that provided me with glamour — a detail he didn't need to know or would care about. To balance the pact, I would grant him a small favor. This pledge lasts the duration of one turn of the moon, so that we renew it every month. But when the queen ordered me to open the pledge to his motley and to allow them to see through the Mask of all changelings, it also meant that I would receive much more glamour from it. And... also owe a number of favors every month. A small one for each of them. The Queen knows. She heard the pledge spoken. I don't think she liked that, but she'd assumed the details of the pledge were standard and didn't ask me before she ordered me to offer it."

Mizuko left it unsaid, but Rey could guess at the trap the Queen had unwittingly fallen into. Veridia could not very well turn around and order Mizuko to break the pledge or to rescind the offer without losing face and showing a weakness to the vampires. Meanwhile, the vampires got what Veridia had feared they might get — influence over Mizuko. Now, by the Queen's own mistake, she'd allowed it to happen — at least until the Queen found a way around it, perhaps by offering something the vampires would find more tempting. Rey could see why Mizuko wasn't sure Veridia would want these details known. Had it been anyone else, Mizuko wouldn't have discussed the Queen's business.

"What kind of favor can they ask? Anything they want?"

Mizuko shook her head. "They can ask anything, but I need only grant favors that are fairly balanced with the magic they give me. A small thing. I suppose if I didn't see the harm in it I might grant larger favors. They have all been good to me. But the pledge stipulates only small favors — and I am the judge of that."

Rey nodded, though she did have some concerns about what Mizuko might consider a harmless larger favor. She raised her hands to sign again but at that moment, the server arrived to take their orders.

After that was completed, Mizuko signed, "My biggest regret in all this is that Richard doesn't seem to like or trust me anymore."

"Richard likes you," Rey signed with a smile. "He just dreads the idea of Veridia ordering him to kill you, and if something bad happens with the vampires, there's no way he can protect you. As for trust, it's Remy - and all vampires - he has a problem with."

"Well that makes me feel better. I think." Mizuko sighed. "This all got so complicated. I started out just trying to do what my queen wanted me to do; get out in the world. Reconnect. I've been doing the best I can."

"That's all anyone can do." Rey took a sip of her wine. "I'm certainly not the poster child for perfect."

"I don't know," Mizuko signed. "You seem to manage to attract less bad attention, and you could probably get away with murder. That reminds me; whatever did you decide to do with that suitcase full of drugs?"

"I sold it through some connections I have," Rey signed. "No way to trace it back to either of us. Didn't get full market value for it, but that's the way it goes. And you say I attract less bad attention? Which of us has been hunted down by a fear-feeding murderous spirit and the target of a power hungry vampire lately?" Rey was smiling as she signed the last words, softening their blow.

"Point to you," Mizuko signed.

"Besides, with your looks it's only natural you get noticed more than I do. Take the guys at the table two rows behind us and three rows to the right. They sure as heck aren't scoping me out."

Mizuko looked at them, then turned back to Rey. "I never really noticed," she admitted. It wasn't something she thought about very much. She knew her Keeper had designed her as lure and she knew it was effective, but she simply was too busy trying to ignore the odd little things she hallucinated at the edge of her vision to notice things like men checking her out.

"Trust me. Even without your Voice, you're a sex magnet. When we're out together, I'm like the ugly step-sister, or I might as well not even be in the room." Rey chuckled. She was like any women - sometimes she liked to be noticed. For the most part, being in Mizuko's "shadow" didn't bother her, but once in a while it was really annoying.

"I'm sorry," Mizuko signed sadly. "I don't mean to make you feel less than what you really are. Maybe I should bathe less." Yeah, like that was going to happen. "Or maybe not brush my hair."

"No, don't go doing that," Rey signed. "It's just the way you are, and that's okay. Guys just need to stop thinking with their groin and more with their brains." She was definitely grateful that Richard was one of the cerebral thinkers, and boy, it definitely didn't detract from his bedroom skills. "Besides, you're the Legate, the voice of our Queen, and you ought to look the part."

Mizuko nodded, then signed, "Okay."

"When do you think you're going to see Remy again?" Rey signed. "Valentine's day is coming up..." She grinned.

Mizuko looked sad. "He's very angry with me, Rey. I pushed very hard last night so I don't know if he'll see me again or not. I take comfort in knowing that he does care, but whether he forgives me or not is entirely up to him."

"Well, you've got a choice to make. You can either sit around and wait, or you can make the first move to

patch things up with him." Rey thought back to her conversation with Richard. "An apology can go a long way to fixing things. Richard was really angry with me for not telling him Remy was a vampire. We talked about it and I apologized, and now everything's good again."

Mizuko sat in thought for a moment. "Do you think if I call him and leave him a message for him that will help? I asked Carson to extend my apologies, but maybe that isn't enough? Maybe I could invite him to meet with me in addition to apologizing. Then he can decide if he's too angry or busy to deal with me. What do you think?"

"An apology in person has a lot more meaning than a voice mail message." Rey's expression was serious and supportive. "Anyone can dial a phone number, but it takes a lot more courage to do it face to face."

"And if he won't see me, then I walk away, right?"

"You could," Rey signed, "It really comes down to how important this relationship is to you. If it's nothing more than sex, then sure, walk away. There's all kinds of other guys out there who could do the job. If you care about him, and want to see if there can be more, if you really want to be with him, then you wait a while and then try again. If he won't see you right away, maybe he just needs more time to cool down. Don't take it as a rejection, unless he explicitly tells you he never wants to see you again. As in 'I never want to see you again'."

Mizuko looked at Rey and utterly failed to put into words how she felt about it. She felt like, if she couldn't work things out with Remy, she didn't want to try making a life in this world anymore. She thought her heart might break. A part of her also told her that returning to the Hollow would save many more problems for people than it would create. She decided not to voice any of it. Instead, she signed, "I don't find the sex to be very important to me. I enjoy being around him and disappointing him makes my stomach upset, but I see him only perhaps once a month. I'd like to see him more often because he makes me feel like a person. I feel like I can get a handle on this world around me. I try to be just as good to him, but I'm terrible at it. I never know what I'm supposed to do."

"There is no magic formula for a perfect relationship," Rey replied in sign. "I certainly wasn't born knowing how to relate to people. It's trial and error, but it gets easier the better you know the person. If you want more from the relationship, to see him more often, then you need to tell him that and see if you can come up with some kind of compromise. Richard and I certainly don't see each other nearly as much as we'd like to. There's no way we can change that so we take what we can. Sometimes it's a couple hours, sometimes it's a five minute phone conversation." She shrugged. "You need to talk to him. Come up with something that works for both of you."

Mizuko nodded. "I'll try."

"That's all anyone can ask." Rey was relieved, but not for the reasons Mizuko might have thought. Her friend's description of how she felt about Remy closely matched the way she felt about Richard. Mizuko obviously, at least to Rey, had no idea of what love might feel like, and how one acts when in love. Given the way Mizuko had latched onto the belief that Remy cared for her because he was looking after her, Rey was worried what her friend might do when the idea she might love Remy entered the picture. It might make it easy - incredibly easy - for Remy to take advantage of Mizuko and gain a lot more control over her than she would admit, or possibly even realize. Better, Rey thought, that the discussion not happen now. If Remy was angry enough to break it off, then that might be the end of it. If not, well, Rey would see how well she could manage that fallout.

"So," Mizuko began signing, "what do you think of your sister's friends?"

"They're interesting," Rey signed in reply. "I enjoyed talking to Aurra, at least. Yvonne had to leave just before I did because she had classes."

"Do you intend to do anything with them?"

"Do? As in join up with them, become part of their coven? Not very likely. There's no way I'm going to worship "Ishtar", even if she would accept me," Rey signed. "I think I might enjoy hanging around them once in a while, though."

"Not join them," Mizuko signed. "I meant do with them. In conjunction with them. Or to them. I ask because they've clearly been claimed by the Emerald Queen. It sounds like they are a very large group which means potentially a great deal of power for Ishtar. I would expect her to protect her resources." Mizuko shrugged. "Mostly I feel very sympathetic toward them. In some ways, I think they are more lost in this world than I am."

"Perhaps," Rey agreed, "but I doubt she would be happy about someone interfering with them. Aurra told me she'd promised to protect them, and they've got a lot of faith in her. She's not even really a goddess, but I'm certainly not going to tell them that."

"I'm not sure what the Emerald Queen is," Mizuko signed. "It's hard for me to accept she would lie to them. If she says she's a goddess, how do you know she isn't exactly what she says she is? Or maybe her followers have made assumptions." She shrugged again. "All I know is that I'm pretty sure I didn't imagine her kicking the Goblin King's ass right out of Iron Mountain and end the war. Maybe that means she's a goddess. Maybe not. I'm in no position to judge."

"From what I was able to gather, she's presented herself as the Ishtar to Marie and the other witches," Rey signed, and paused as their food was delivered to the table. "She's a powerful changeling that's cracked." She tapped her temple. "Unless she's gotten possessed by a spirit, then it's likely her connection to the Wyrd is really strong and she's joined up with a group of like-minded changelings and that gave her the abilities she has. I've met the goddess Anu, and from everything I've learned, the Spring Queen ain't no goddess."

"So, you say gods are spirits. I heard that spirits that enter the Hedge gain flesh," Mizuko replied.

"Possibly." The thought of spirits reminded her of Hamilton, her familiar and the pang of loss she felt whenever she remembered him. She had no idea what happened to him when she was Taken, and neither Ironclaw or Grey had seen him afterwards. "But spirits simply don't have human or human-like forms. A cat spirit would end up a cat. A fire spirit would be a thing of living fire, a little flame or a spark, depending on what it is."

"That doesn't make any sense to me," Mizuko complained. "You say a cat spirit looks like a cat. Did this Anu not look like a human?"

"I don't know what it looked like as a spirit," Rey signed, "but when I met her she had Claimed a human girl, someone I considered to be a good friend. When a spirit Claims a human, they completely posses them. Everything of the human's personality is locked away, as if the person simply doesn't exist anymore. A horrific form of slavery. I don't know if spirits can possess changelings, but I don't think so." Her old loathing of Anne-Marie?, the vampire who had enslaved Jesse, hadn't abated.

"So you don't know what Anu looked like," Mizuko said, entirely focused on the point she was attempting to make. "My guess is that if Ishtar's followers believe her to be a goddess and that's who they worship, then the only reason that the Emerald Queen would allow that to continue is if it empowered her. If she does gain power from the worship of Ishtar but yet is not Ishtar as you insist, then the answer must be halfway between."

"She made a contract with a goddess. I'll bet you anything you like that's what happened." Mizuko began laying out the evidence. "Suddenly she had all this power to defeat the Goblin King, didn't she? Her very

nature is changed, different. She's fae, but it's not hard to see that it's covering something more — evidence the sudden appearance of that jewelry or armor or whatever it is. She's wielding lot of power and gaining something valuable enough from worshippers to agree to protect them. There is sounds like they aren't just a few people, either. So?" Mizuko said raising her eyebrow.

She continued, answering her own question. "So she made a contract or something very like it with this Ishtar to inherit her power. Who knows what she had to sacrifice for it, but there it is. A new goddess. That must be why Veridia is so concerned about it, why she's spent all her available time since September poking around trying to figure out what's going on with the Emerald Queen."

"Perhaps. With the Emerald Queens sudden increase in power, it could lead to an imbalance in the Courts. Who knows what "Ishtar" might do next." Rey shook her head. "I need to have a meeting with Veridia so I can tell her what I've found out so far."

Mizuko nodded.

### *Veridia*

*January 30, 2012*

Mizuko arranged for Rey to have a meeting with Veridia near the end of January. Veridia agreed to meet her at an old drive-in. It had been closed for a couple decades now, the property and grassy parking area overgrown with small bushes and even a few trees. Apparently no one had shown any interest in building anything new out here despite the for sale sign that had been up near the road for as long as anyone could remember.

There was a kind of narrow stage in front of the big, stained screen. The white paint was mostly peeled now but it still reflected a little of the moonlight that glared down from a cold, starry sky. Veridia sat in the middle of the stage in a flowing dress and a furry grey and white jacket. Her legs were swinging freely over the edge of the stage. Richard was there as well, leaning against the black Buick they'd arrived in, looking casual but not inconspicuous.

Rey approached Veridia and curtsied with grace, mentally cursing her wisps to behave themselves while they darted around her like predatory flying mice.

Veridia smiled slightly and acknowledged Rey with a nod.

Rey turned her head to look at Richard and her expression softened slightly when she greeted him with a nod. Putting her attention back on the queen, she said, "I appreciate your taking some time to see me, your Highness. I have some information for you, in follow up to the note that was included with the report on Fidelius and the carnival."

Veridia frowned. "What note?"

"You did not get it, then." Rey frowned as well. She was not happy, and decided she would ask Less what happened to the note. "It was brief statement about the four women your Paladin and I met while at the Hallowe'en ball. Worshippers of Ishtar, I believe."

Veridia's tone was measured, even bored, but there was interest in her eyes. "I see. What would possess you to independently investigate a regent of the Duchy?"

Rey's own reply was calm, perhaps even nonchalant, though her own gaze acknowledged her regent's interest. "I am not pursuing any kind of investigation, my queen. Sometimes information does find its way to me, and when it does, I would be a fool not to pay attention to it. I thought it might be of use to you, in service to the Duchy."

"I see. So, what has your not-investigation turned up?"

"A number of witches, both with supernatural abilities and without, have been recruited into Ishtar service as worshippers," Rey said. "I am not sure how many, but I suspect a fair number were lured in by her promises of protection. The witches in Mythic were being hunted down in the late spring last year, and that had them all scared."

"At least twenty members of her cult are confirmed," Veridia stated. "All of whom are mortals."

"She also has ensorcelled them all, though she did not tell them that's what she did," Rey continued. "She told them it allows them to see through the "Big Lie", whatever that means."

"How did you come into that particular bit of information?"

"Because one of her priestesses, and another of her cult members, could see through a Changeling's Mask, and she told me Ishtar had given all her followers that blessing. I have no reason to doubt her. My Mask is nowhere near as disconcerting as my fae mien, and her reaction told me more than anything that she was telling the truth."

"So these cultists know you?"

"Three of them do," Rey replied with a nod, "though only two of them have seen my fae mien." She paused for a moment. "If I wished to encourage the acquaintance and get to know them better, I do not believe it would be difficult to do so."

"Is there any particular reason why you would wish to do that? From what you told me, Ishtar has acquired simply a band of mortals. It's unusual to ensorcel so many mortals and organize them into a cult, but what about this in particular do you find interesting enough to come to me." Veridia watched Rey.

"There are several reasons," Rey said. "but the most important is the potential danger from it all. Her cultists have been sworn to secrecy, just like any mortal ensorcelled I presume, but the promise of protection is my greatest worry. The club where they meet is Blood Tears, and it's a prime feeding ground for vampires. If her cultists are being fed upon, the cultists will react badly and go to Ishtar. That could lead to some difficulties with the vampire population in this area."

"I am also concerned with the Emerald Queen's mental stability. Personally, I don't care what she says or claims. She's not a goddess, and her delusions could lead her to take actions that are not in the best interest of the Duchy as a whole."

"She has made no formal station to such an effect, nor have I heard that except from you and a few ghosts of questionable stability," Veridia said softly. "Were I you, I would be very careful about basing your... opinions... on what mortals tell you. I should think that Witch Lafitte would understand how simple it is to mislead them, make them believe anything you wish."

"Further, the Emerald Queen has misled the entire Duchy before, making us believe she was a weak queen in need of assistance from the other Courts. Yet another illusion that she discarded only when there was no other option left but to reveal her power and confront the Goblin King." Veridia's voice took an edge hard enough to cut glass. "After, I might add, the Storm King and I had already sacrificed much to try to drive him



away. Don't be drawn into that woman's trap. She wants you to think her insane. Feigning weakness is her weapon to uncover her enemies and stab at them when they are most vulnerable."

"I understand," Rey replied solemnly. She knew the dangers of what she'd said, and accepted the reprimand for what it was. Nor did Rey have any desire to come under Ishtar's scrutiny. "Do you suggest it would be wise to steer clear of the cultists. I confess I am loathe to do so, but for personal reasons."

"What personal reasons?"

Rey figured Veridia would figure it all out eventually. "My sister is one of her cultists, and I believe one of her priestesses. She had taken it upon herself to establish I was a witch, I believe to forge a common link between her, her friends, and myself. For what reasons, I'm not exactly sure yet."

Veridia drew back a little. "They consider themselves witches. How odd. And now they have Ishtar to guide them." Veridia considered that. "Did you notice if any of them had any actual power?"

"Not yet," Rey admitted, "but I would not be surprised if the ones who are her priestesses had some measure of their own power beforehand. That hunter who was kidnapping and killing the witches was looking for ones with power. Given what he was capable of when my motley put an end to it, I'd have to say the odds are good. But I don't think I'll ever be a witness to what they might be able to do if I do not somehow become close in their confidence."

"You said your sister is involved. I presume she's mortal. It must be upsetting to you that she has taken a pledge with the Spring Queen to worship her. If your sister believes Ishtar is a goddess, then you must be furious." Veridia smiled, her black eyes glittering in the moonlight.

"I cannot control what she says or does," Rey said with an acknowledging nod, "but I am... dissatisfied with the current situation." She straightened up slightly, and reigned her desire to seek out the false Ishtar and beat her senseless. "I do not wish to loose her to any changeling's machinations, no matter who he or she might be."

Veridia's tone was idle, but her eyes remained intense. "Have you heard of something called the Lost Pantheon?"

"I have heard of it, but don't know much more than the name," Rey replied.

"It is an ancient order, Witch Lafitte. Older, it seems, than every other noble order. Older than agriculture or even mortal civilization. A member of this order was here in the Duchy as the Emerald Queen's advisor for nearly a year before her ... transformation. Someone devoted to uncovering the truth might begin by learning what this ancient order is and what it's about. Of course, if that person was perceived as a threat to Ishtar or the people she was sworn to protect, I wouldn't know anything about it." Veridia's voice turned bitter. "No one I know would be foolish enough to risk the Duchy losing the best defense against the True Fae we have, would we?"

Rey shook her head. "Something we can ill afford."

"Not unless we can find a better one," Veridia said. She considered Rey for a moment before speaking again. "Since you've already stumbled across information, however, I may as well hear it. What else do you have for me?"

"Nothing useful, my Queen." Rey's voice held a hint of apology. "Just opinions and unsubstantiated inferences."

Veridia nodded dismissively. "Watch yourself, Witch Lafitte. I have heard many unsubstantiated, but

disturbing things about this Lost Pantheon."

—

*Richard*

A couple hours after Rey had her interview with Veridia, Richard called her and asked if she would like to have coffee as he did from time to time when he had an opportunity. She met him at Station Beanery, and greeted him with a wide, happy smile.

They put in their orders and retreated to a booth at the far end of the main floor. It was isolated enough they had some privacy. "I had a talk with Mizuko," she said softly, "and I learned some rather interesting things. She did tell me a bit about the queen's meeting with the vampires."

Richard leaned forward a little. "Don't hold me in suspense. What have you learned?"

"The queen ordered Mizuko to join with all of Remy's friends, the equivalent of a motley, I think, into the pledge Mizuko had already in place with Remy, but with one change. Veridia wanted the vampires to be able to see through the Masks of all changelings. Mizuko had no problems doing so, and it appears Veridia was not aware of the other changes Mizuko had made to the pledge."

Richard frowned. "I take it that's the sticking point. What did she change?"

"They must greet her with a kiss," Rey said, "and in exchange, she gets a bit of glamour. She also grants them each one small favor during the duration of the pledge, and she decides if it is a small favor or not. She also told me she might be inclined to grant a larger favor if she thought it was harmless."

"Well, that doesn't sound horrible. What do you think?"

"You're right, it doesn't sound all that bad," Rey agreed, "but then I think about the other thing she told me. Apparently, she made Remy very angry with her and she was worried that he might not forgive her. I asked her if it mattered to her if he didn't. She told me that sex with him wasn't very important, and that she's happy when she's with him, though they don't spend as much time together as she'd like. That the idea of disappointing him makes her stomach upset. She didn't seem to understand what those feelings meant. I wasn't about to tell her I know what it's called."

"She's fallen for him."

"Looks like it. And she believes he cares for her, though she won't accept the fact there's a difference between someone caring for you and someone caring about you. At least not in Remy's case."

"I doubt logic has much place in her reasoning regarding him given her feelings," Richard pointed out.

"I know, which is why I didn't want to bring the word love into the conversation. Not yet, at least."

Richard sighed. "I'm beginning to feel sorry for her."

"I'm trying very hard not to." Rey reached out placed her hand next to his, their fingers brushing. "I want her to be happy, but at the same time it's her life and nobody can live it for her. If she finds out he's been playing her, or the relationship breaks down, it's going to hit her really hard."

Richard squeezed her hand briefly. "I'm not sure I'm willing to take such a passive stance. She isn't just

Mizuko, your friend. She's also the Legate and she under the influence of a vampire. If the vampire realizes what he has over her, what's to stop him from taking advantage of that fact while stringing her along? What might that mean not just for your friend, but for Autumn?"

"I know, but I have no idea how to get her to open her eyes and see what's going on. To see the danger of the situation. She's so... inexperienced. She told me herself that she attracts all kinds of dangerous attention, while I don't." Rey decided not to comment on that. "It seems like Remy is the only man who's ever paid any kind of attention to her that she's considered good. That makes her feel human. Maybe what we need to do is find someone else who could do the same thing for her, but is less dangerous to Autumn and the Duchy."

Richard raised an eyebrow. "A suitor. It wouldn't be hard to find someone willing to try, I'd think. The hard part might be getting her to give them a chance. You know her best. Do you think she would?"

"I don't know. She said she'd be true to him, but I think she may have been referring just to sex. If the suitor was subtle. As in not being blatantly obvious that he's trying to steal her away from Remy. Befriend her and start at that angle." Her lips quirked in a bemused little smile. "Get to know her first. Show her Remy's not the only man who can make her feel like a human, or a woman."

"I don't suppose you know anyone who could do that?"

"Not yet." Rey was confident she'd find someone, but it might not be in time to save her friend.

"Then we'll need to watch her carefully. I think we might need help with that. Is there anyone else close to her that we might convince to watch her? Or someone else she talks to?" Richard figured that last was a longshot, but it was worth asking.

"That's part of the problem. Outside of the motley, I don't think she has anyone. Except Amber. We might have a chance with her."

"Amber. Who is that?"

"A mortal friend of Mizuko's," Rey explained, and told him about the motley saving Amber (and not omitting their failure to save Mizuko's other two friends) and stopping the Hunter. "Mizuko has ensorcelled her, and Amber now acts as a kind of personal assistant for her. Makes sure the mundane details, like paying the bills and making sure Mizuko has appropriate clothing to wear, get done. Their friendship is quite strong."

"So if we approach Amber and convince her we just want to make certain Mizuko is all right, she might help us keep an eye on her." He nodded. "That sounds almost like a plan."

Rey gave a soft snort of laughter. "I seem to specialize in almost plans. I'll find a way to get a hold of her. A night when Mizuko's working is likely to be our best bet."

Richard nodded and sat back. Their conversation ran toward more personal topics while they enjoyed their specialty brews and company.

—

Mizuko had returned to her apartment and fretted for hours after the early supper with Rey. She'd decided she would apologize for him, and she had no reservations about that. It was his reaction that made her so anxious. If he wouldn't listen or accept, what would she do? Where would she go? She felt her heart might break, that it would feel less lonely to retreat rather than stand alone among crowds of mortals. Still, she decided she'd rather know sooner than later. She had to contact him and her only way to do that was by phone. She didn't even have the numbers for Carson, Meronet or any of the others. She had to go through Remy directly.

She sat down on her over-sized bed in her gigantic apartment and stared at the cell phone in her hands. She made her fingers punch Remy's number, then put the phone to her ear and waited. The call went directly to voice mail after two rings. She left a message indicating she wanted to talk to him to apologize, then hung up abruptly. Then she began to worry that he wouldn't care to give her the chance. What was the correct amount of time to wait before it was clear that he wasn't simply busy? How would she know he didn't want to speak to her if he didn't tell her? She had no idea and she didn't feel like talking to anyone about it anymore.

After some thought she decided she didn't care what was traditional or correct or 'normal' for mortals. She would wait until she no longer wished to feel miserable, and then she would leave through the Hedge Gate.

About half an hour later the phone rang, showing Remy's number on the display. She answered right away.

"Good evening, *ma petite*." His voice was pleasant as always. "You wished to speak with me?"

"Yes. Can we meet in person?"

"I'll be available in about two hours. Is there anywhere in particular you'd like to meet?"

"No. Anywhere you are comfortable."

"Do you want this meeting to be public or private?"

"I intend to apologize for making you angry," Mizuko stated. "I'm no coward. I will do it wherever you wish."

"It was not my intention to imply you were," Remy replied. "Some people want an audience, and some people don't. How about I meet you at your apartment?"

She nodded, realized he couldn't hear that, then said, "That sounds fine."

Two hours later, there was a knock at the apartment door.

Mizuko had used the time to dress nicely for him. She had nothing high quality or otherwise expensive to wear, but she managed a skirt that fell to her knees and a soft, dark green pullover sweater with a deep vee neck. She checked the peephole, then opened the door.

Remy was in the corridor, wearing a suit and tie, looking for all the world like he'd just stepped out of a high-powered business meeting.

She looked at him curiously, then stepped aside and swept the door open. She gestured slightly with her head to invite him inside.

He took one step into the apartment, then caught up her hand and kissed her knuckles. "It is a pleasure to see you this evening."

That took her off guard. She expected anger, not the cordial demeanor he wore now. The confusion she felt was written on her face as she let the door drift closed behind him. But then she turned and headed into the living room where she stopped and waited for him.

He glanced around the place as he followed her and paused at her side when he reached her. His manner was casual, and he appeared relaxed.

Mizuko narrowed her eyes and signed, "Aren't you supposed to be angry?"

"About what?"

Mizuko's motions when she signed her response were abrupt, frustrated. "Last night I pressured you to answer a question and it made you so angry you left the car," she pointed out. "And I'm sorry for that. I know you feel the answer should be obvious to me and I'm sorry that it isn't. You were so angry, I expected you wouldn't see me again."

"I left the car," Remy said carefully, "so that I would not do something regrettable."

"I can't read you, Remy," Mizuko signed, wondering if her apology had done any good at all. She felt as frustrated as she did the previous night.

He sighed. "I was angry enough that had I stayed, I would have harmed you. And that would not do."

She looked back at him, nodded once and then signed, "I'm sorry for all of that, as well as what I did earlier last night."

Remy nodded. "Are you enjoying living here?" he asked.

"It's convenient, but otherwise I hadn't thought about it. Why do you ask?"

"Just curious. You hadn't told me one way or the other what you thought."

Mizuko thought about that, then decided to add a little piece of information. "It is a nice place. There is a permanent Gate to the... to my world very close by. That makes it easy for me to disappear when I want for as long as I want. And so far nothing horrible has emerged from it. I watch it when I'm able."

"Why would you want to disappear for a while?"

Mizuko took a moment to tally up the various reasons. "I'm alone a lot and lately I have many questions that won't be answered. I can go there to get away from these feelings. The dangers of that place can keep me busy enough I don't have to think about it. I need to go there from time to time anyway because mortal food doesn't sustain me. I'd starve sooner or later."

"What is disturbing you so?"

"Feelings I'm not used to. Maybe you wouldn't understand," she signed with a sigh.

"Why do you think that?"

"Why wouldn't I?" she returned. "Words are more real to me than deeds, but you never tell me you have them. Most of my kind are very adept at reading people, but I am not. I suppose I am crippled in that way. I can't change it." She shrugged. "I did not expect to have to worry about feelings. I've decided I don't like it."

"I never have what?" Remy asked. "Deeds?"

She shook her head and sighed. "Feelings, Remy. Feelings. Never mind. Just forget about it." She took a step over and sat down in one of the chairs heavily.

"I do have feelings, *ma petite*," Remy said softly. "I just do not talk about them. For my kind, words mean very little. Actions are what matter."

"I would like to see you more often than I have," Mizuko signed. "And I feel ill when I think I've upset you. I don't know what this means." She wasn't asking him to figure it out for her. It was just a fact. She did have a question, though. "Someone told me that there is a difference between caring for a person and caring about a person. I don't see a difference. Do you?"

Remy nodded. "There is."

Mizuko waited.

"You want an explanation?"

She shook her head. "No. I want you to talk to me."

"About what? It is difficult to hold a conversation if one does not know the topic."

"You have not accepted or declined my apology," Mizuko signed. "Nor have you told me what you really think or feel about me. You say actions speak louder than words. Well then, let me point out your actions. You rarely seek me out. You see me about once a month. This shows little interest in me, Remy. Yet you go out of your way to help me when I needed help. So, you're a gentleman and I appreciate that."

"Last night I felt bad because I realized your feelings mattered to me." She threw up her hands, which were unable to keep up with the words she wanted said. "*Dammit, Remy! Do you have any idea what I would do for you if only you asked? You made me feel like a person. And I have begun feeling for you. Strongly. It could only have been you...*"

"I wish you would not always be this... gentleman with me," she signed. "Even if you were a monster to me, at least I would know how you feel about me."

"I do not feel an apology was required," Remy replied, "but I will accept it. As for not seeing you more often, it is for your protection. You know how closely associated Miss Lafitte is with me." Which meant there were no links whatsoever, except perhaps the fact Remy was Mizuko's friend. "You know what Leopold wanted to do. If any of my kind believed there was anything stronger between the two of us than there already is, they may do far worse to you."

"Shouldn't it be my choice?" Mizuko signed. "You know now I'm not defenseless. I can disappear in a second if I wish it, though I can do much more than that. To protect you, I can pretend to be your servant. A blood slave? Remy told me of them and you can coach me in what I need to know. If it means I can be closer to you, I will do it."

"I do not know if it is possible to pretend," Remy said, and then continued carefully. "And what might your queen think if word got back to her about your new behavior?"

"I have already spoken with her," Mizuko signed. "She has instructed me that if I go this route, then she will assist me in maintaining such an illusion if it meant that I would remain free of influence. She said she does not care how it appears to others; illusion is our bread and butter." In truth, Mizuko was rather fuzzy on how exactly Veridia thought she could assist but she had more pressing concerns on her mind. Her conversation had been very brief.

"We will gradually spend more time together, then," Remy said. "But I cannot promise more than once a week.."

To her ears, it sounded like a chore he was agreeing to. She sighed. "How thrilling. Look. Come see me when you want to see me. Better yet, see me when you've figured out what it is you want from me and how to talk to me." She folded her arms around her middle and then turned away from him. She didn't want him to see her face and figured he'd let himself out.

"I want to see you every minute of every day, *ma petite*," he whispered. "But for my own safety, I cannot."

She turned around in surprise, but he was already gone. She looked over at the apartment door as it shut with a quiet click. The speed at which he must have moved caught her breath for a moment. When the surprise faded, she thought about what he'd said. What did it mean that for his safety he couldn't see her as often as he wanted? Was he threatened by someone or something? Was she a threat to him somehow?