

Ashes
BOOK 1

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Phoenix
IGNITED

Anne Dminous



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by
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foreword

Back in the mid-1990s, I discovered a strange anime called *Ranma ½*. I don't even recall how I stumbled upon it anymore; it's of little relevance now. But, suffice to say, it became a huge part of my life. So much so, in fact, that a year or so later, when I joined an IRC server (it's Discord for us old people) that was doing anime role playing, and I was invited to select a character, I didn't hesitate to type a command that would change my life forever:

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/nick RanmaSaotome
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Nearly every day for the next ten years, I embodied Ranma Saotome online. In the process, I learned a lot about the character and far more about myself. I forged friendships that have lasted me my entire adult life. It is not at all hyperbole to say I long ago lost count of the number of nights Ranma Saotome saved my life. But, there was one story I'd wanted to tell with my roleplaying group that I never got the chance to, ever since seeing the film *Coyote Ugly*. It went something like, *what if Ranma got a job, in a bar, as a girl, singing? And what if it was run by a family that showed her something approximating unconditional love?*

Eventually, I started dating, and the person I was with at the time wasn't a huge fan of anime in general and Ranma in particular, and so I shelved the fandom in my heart for the better part of twenty years. Over time, ADHD and life got in the way, and our merry little band scattered to the winds, but the bug never left me about this last great story I wanted to tell.

It remained dormant until May of 2023, when I was experiencing a period of profound depression, ruminating about all the things I wanted to do in my forty-plus years on Earth and had not yet done. Most - international travel and impossible career choices - were far beyond my grasp, but I found myself saying, *what about that Ranma story?* I knew I'd never be able to finish it, given ADHD and time constraints, but I decided to try, just to prove to myself it could not be done so I would stop torturing myself over it.

Less than a week later, what came to be known as *Phoenix Ignited Book 1* was published to fanfiction.net. What came next was a total surprise to me - people started leaving comments and reviews, well-wishes all, telling me that the story had impacted them for the better in some way. It gave me the sense that what I was doing was not just some idle hobby to kill a few hours, but a means to reach across the vastness of the internet and touch people; to give them a gift of hope and strength in some way through my words in even the smallest of measure.

One book became four, four became thirteen and counting, and still the story continues. It has been the honor of my life to tell this story, and to touch the hearts of so many. I remain, as always, grateful beyond words for the opportunity to do so.

I wish to call out a few people for specific acknowledgement:

First, last, and always, my beloved Victoria. You are the north star of my soul and the source of all the light and warmth in my universe. You are the song in my heart, the spring in my step, and my reason for being. Your support throughout the two years of this project and the seven years of our marriage to date has been unparalleled, exceeding even my wildest hope and expectation. I have written and published nearly a million words to date, and yet I will never find them in sufficient measure to express my gratitude for your kindness, your understanding, your grace, your patience and your love.

Noelle, Ashley, Ken and Kaori, my dear friends from that IRC server way back when. You are all my sisters and brothers today and always, and I cannot thank you enough for all the nights you carried me through tears and heartbreak and loneliness. You taught me so much about myself, and about life, and I will cherish each of you to the end of my days.

Ina, PrincessColumbia, Diet Gender Fluid, Xadlly, Tessea, Rose, Myka, Eldanil, Vikara, Lana, PHR.PyrusLex, GoddessOfSocialDistancing, JeweledDreams, lady_zed, Suryrn, Claire, Emma, Sky, Amy, Sarah, Vroom, Celhstial, ClericalError, and so many others in the Storytellers' Speakeasy Discord server and the various and sundry online platforms where *Phoenix* is posted, who have not only become fans of my writing, but dear friends who have celebrated my triumphs with me and supported and encouraged me through dark nights filled with sadness, impostor syndrome and despair. Thank you all for your undying faith, your wise counsel, your insightful feedback and your enduring friendship.

Thank you to Jordan, the incredible illustrator who produced the cover art for the *Phoenix* Saga. Thanks also go to Cliff for his assistance in the field of mixology.

Thank you to Takahashi Rumiko and everyone on the myriad teams that have produced Ranma ½ content over the years, for giving me this glorious sandbox in which to experience such an incredible journey and forge such indelible friendships.

And, finally, my thanks goes to you. Every person holding a copy of this book in their hand is special to me. Every person who has ever read this story online and offered a review, a rating, a comment, a like, a kudos, a favorite, a bookmark, a follow, or just a silent smile I never saw from the other end of the internet has my unending gratitude. Thank you, my beloved Firebirds, for the precious gifts of your time, your attention, your trust and your light. You have taught me to believe in myself in ways I didn't know were possible. Thanks to you, I can believe it most days when I look at myself in the mirror and say, *I am wanted, I have worth, and I have people who care about me.*

From the bottom of my heart, ***thank you for letting me tell you a story.***

Anne 

Ranma sighed to herself, distantly fidgeting with the last few grains of rice in her bowl with a chopstick. Everyone else had long since left the breakfast table. She had been like this for weeks, living in a constant haze of hopelessness and dread. It felt like walking through quicksand every day, and all she'd have to do was hold still for just a minute and it would swallow her whole.

Five months. Five long months since "it" happened. Everyone in the Tendo household tried not to say it out loud, but despite their efforts, Ranma never let it out of her mind for a second. *Stupid old ghoul thought she'd punish me and force me to marry Xian Pu,* Ranma thought. *Boy, did that plan backfire.*

Ranma replayed it in her thoughts for what must have been the millionth time. All of it. The old witch sneaking up from behind, a little poke with her walking stick, and that was that. Xian Pu's grandmother had triggered the Full-Body Cat's Tongue pressure point. Ever since, every nerve in Ranma's body was turned up to maximum volume, and the slightest touch anywhere on Ranma's skin could cause unbelievable agony. She couldn't take a hit anymore – even a punch from a weakling like her father felt like a wrecking ball. Most days, she could barely concentrate on anything but the ever-present scratching of her clothes on her skin as she moved. Worst of all, the Cat's Tongue meant the sensation of temperature was amplified too, and that meant hot water was utterly intolerable on her skin.

Of course, the Full-Body Cat's Tongue wasn't Ranma's **first** curse. No, before that, there had been Jusenkyo - a little backwater training ground in northwestern China, in the Qinghai province. It was a little, hidden place with a huge secret: its many cursed springs. Each of the little pools of water had seen some manner of creature drown in it over the millennia. Upon falling into one of them, any unwitting victim would be doomed to take the form of the last being to drown in that particular spring whenever they got wet. Both Ranma and his father had been afflicted when they had gone there to practice aerial combat. In the case of Ranma's father, it was a giant panda, and in Ranma's... well, she saw the result every time she looked in the mirror and remembered the boy she used to be.

She would retake her natural form if splashed with warm water, but only until the next time she encountered cold or room-temperature liquid. Going back to being a guy sounded so easy - just a tea kettle away - and yet, the Full-Body Cat's Tongue made it entirely unbearable to consider. That was the true torture of the situation - knowing she could have her old body back any time she wanted it; all she would have to do is endure feeling as if every cell of her skin was being burned alive.

She'd tried. For days, she tried to force herself to suffer through it. *It'll only hurt for a minute,* she thought, but how wrong she was. Once, Ranma's father had held her down so she couldn't escape the kettle on reflex, and Mr. Tendo poured it over her head. She changed back into her original masculine form, but the searing agony of the warm liquid on her hypersensitive skin felt as if she were being boiled like a lobster.

After two minutes that felt like an eternity, Akane had burst into the bathroom and doused her betrothed with a bucket of cold water, bringing an end to the burning sensation ravaging his skin, but also rendering Ranma's suffering meaningless as her girlish form returned.

Akane knew that Ranma didn't want her to intervene, but she couldn't just stand outside the bathroom door and listen to him scream any longer.

Ranma, upon coming to terms with the fact that enduring the curse of Jusenkya and the Full-Body Cat's Tongue combined was unbearable, eventually relented and accepted Koh Lon's terms, agreeing to train with her. The old witch had demanded that Ranma learn the powerful Chestnuts Roasting on an Open Fire technique to prove her worthiness to marry her granddaughter - regardless of the fact that Ranma had no interest in doing so. After weeks of practice, and countless hours of unspeakable pain, Ranma had finally mastered the art of punching at sufficient speed to snatch a chestnut from a flame without being burned. She just had to prove it.

Her mind flashed back to that mountain in the snow, Koh Lon balancing precariously on the end of her walking stick, dangling Ranma's salvation – a little pink vial holding the cure – over a small campfire. All Ranma had to do was snatch it from her hand, and everything would be back to, well, as close to normal as anything that had happened since her visit to the training grounds of Jusenkya.

She cracked her knuckles. *I can do this. I've trained for it*, Ranma thought to herself, her steely gaze daring the licking flames to challenge her. *This is going to hurt like hell, but only for a second.*

With a determined *kiiai*, Ranma began her assault. Utilizing the powerful technique she'd mastered, she snatched time and time again for her objective at superhuman speed, but Xian Pu's grandmother kept pace. Ranma winced as the heat of the fire prickled at her skin, but she had to try and put it out of her mind; the end was in sight. She was moving too fast to be burned, but the Full-Body Cat's Tongue's sensitivity made even the ambient warmth of the fire all but unbearable. Ranma swung wide with her right arm, forcing her adversary to lean closer to dodge. As Koh Lon drew closer, Ranma rocketed her left arm forward and felt her fingers strike porcelain. She clenched her fist and pulled back, breaking the thin chain that held the tiny ampule around the witch's wrist. All she had to do was swallow the Phoenix Pill within, and...

“Saotome!”

So focused was Ranma on her objective that she had failed to notice the slender man in the white robe ascending the slope to her left. In an instant, as she turned her eyes to the man screaming her name, a barrage of chains bearing blades, claws, and a *wooden duck*, for some reason, rained down toward her from the voluminous sleeves of her assailant's robes.

“I will not allow this! Xian Pu is mine!”

Ranma lifted her left arm instinctively to protect her face, and a sickle-shaped barb caught the underside of her wrist, slicing deeply into her flesh through her shirt. The nerves in her arm reacted with an involuntary spasm, causing - just for a moment - her fingers to unclench. Just for a microsecond. Just long enough to make her drop the Phoenix Pill into the fire. As the little pink vial popped open, Ranma watched in slow motion as her life as she knew it ended. The incineration was immediate. Not even the Chestnuts Roasting on an Open Fire technique would have granted her the speed to save it.

Since then, she'd tried everything to find another way to reverse the Full-Body Cat's Tongue. She'd pleaded with Koh Lon for another pill, but she swore there were no more and the

formula to produce them had been lost to the ages. Dr. Tofu had tried every pressure point and acupuncture technique he knew, but it had been no use. Akane's elder sister Nabiki, who'd just graduated from Furinkan High, took her to a college she was applying to in the Minato district to help her try and use something called the outer - no, inter - ...web? Net? Anyway, it was supposed to be, you typed your question in the computer and it would find the answer. Turns out those science dweebs didn't know anything about ancient Amazon medicines, though. As a last-ditch attempt, she'd even asked Happosai for help. Her father's ancient martial arts master had admitted he had no idea how to reverse the effect of the pressure point, though not without first extracting a price Ranma paid in shame.

Suddenly, Ranma's haunting reminiscence was shattered by a familiar voice. "Ranma! I heard what happened! I came the minute I heard!"

It was months ago, asshole. She looked up from the dining room table into the open doorway and recognized the silhouette of Ryoga Hibiki against the rising sun. Ranma said nothing. *Maybe he came in friendship? I sure could use a friend these days,* she thought hopefully. They were frenemies at best, but they'd generally been there for each other when it really counted. She hadn't seen Ryoga in months, not since before "it" happened, but that wasn't especially surprising. It wasn't at all uncommon for him to get lost for months at a time; indeed, their rivalry had only begun when Ryoga issued a challenge over a lunchroom disagreement and then arrived at the designated location for the fight several days late.

"So, it's **true** then?"

Ranma could only manage a sullen nod.

"And that means..."

Ranma gave another sullen nod, looking away just in time to miss the toothy grin beginning to crack Ryoga's mask of concern.

"That means you won't be engaged to Akane anymore! And **she and I can...**" The rest of the sentence was lost to a somewhat maniacal laughter, as tended to befall Ryoga whenever he thought of Ranma's fiancée.

Her melancholy quickly gave way to fury. *How dare he gloat, at a time like this?* "I may be a girl, but at least I can talk to her, **P-chan.**"

Ryoga glowered, clenching his fist. "And *you*, trying to deny Akane her happiness! You know you can't give her what she needs, and yet you won't stand aside for a real man! You're the **pig!**" It never failed to rile Ryoga up when Ranma brought up his own secret Jusenkyo curse, and how it transformed him into the little black swine that Akane had taken to considering an on-again, off-again pet.

An audible gasp from the kitchen doorway split the tension. Kasumi, broom in hand, glared at Ryoga with what could only be described as motherly disapproval. "Ryoga Hibiki! You should be **ashamed** of yourself! Ranma is a **lady** now, and I will **not** have her spoken to that way in this house!"

The massive young man in the yellow shirt snickered darkly – in trying to protect Ranma, the elder of Akane's two sisters had actually driven the knife home. "Of course. My apologies, Kasumi." He turned back to Ranma with a sadistic jeer. "I am **terribly** sorry if I offended you,

miss." Ryoga bowed emphatically, turned on his right heel, and exited back through the doorway to the side yard with an unmistakable bounce in his step.



Ranma sat on her bedroll in the Tendo guest room, hugging her knees and resting her chin on them through her black gi pants. Ryoga's words echoed in her mind. He was such a jerk, but maybe he was right. He would be able to take care of Akane and the dojo in ways that Ranma no longer could. Despite the arrangement between Ranma's father and Mr. Tendo, merging their families and the two branches of the Anything-Goes Martial Arts tradition through their marriage no longer seemed a viable option. Ryoga had intended to head out to the dojo to talk to Akane, probably to finally admit how much he cared about her, or - more likely - fall on his face trying, but that was twelve hours ago. When - or if - he would actually show up was anyone's guess.

She looked away from the doorway, where the current object of her dread hung. Though it was bright white and teal, to Ranma, it might as well have been the black shroud of death itself.

When "it" happened, Ranma had no choice but to stop going to school. Most of her schoolmates, for reasons that utterly escaped her, had never put two and two together about the nature of Ranma's gender-swapping curse, and so suddenly showing up in her current form would have been, well, awkward. For months now, she had focused all of her time on finding another cure and resuming her life.

So much for that. Mr. Tendo and Kasumi, the de facto parents of the household since Ranma's father Genma was always too aloof to care, had apparently decided that it was time for Ranma to try to move on, and to try to find a new normal somehow. To them, that meant returning to Furinkan High for the upcoming school term. As a **girl**.

Everyone would know what had happened. Worse, because she had missed so much time the year before, she would have to repeat her classes. If she were being honest with herself, she'd have known that was a risk anyway; a childhood spent traveling the world learning martial arts techniques had left her severely disadvantaged in academics. Akane would be an upperclassman to her now. Her own ridicule she could find a way to survive, but the thought of Akane being teased for having been engaged to a girl – let alone one who couldn't even keep up with her class – turned her stomach like sour milk. The daily trial by combat for the right to date Akane would no doubt resume, and in her condition, Ranma would be able to do naught more than stand there in her *dress* and watch with the other twittering girls as Akane fought for her own hand. And then she'd graduate, and Ranma would be left there. Alone.

Tatewaki Kuno, who had graduated with Nabiki, was planning to stick around the school as an associate kendo instructor. Having your dad as the principal had its perks, apparently. His wealthy family certainly didn't need him to rush into a real job, and Kuno wasn't leaving as long as he thought there was a chance with Akane. No doubt his hounding of her would be worse than ever, considering that the *vile Ranma Saotome* could no longer be an obstacle.

Akane wouldn't be the only girl he'd be chasing every day with free run of the school, either. Now that the mysterious *pigtails girl* Kuno was equally infatuated with was here to stay, there was no avoiding it. Only Ranma's superior martial arts prowess had protected her from his wandering hands before, but without it? For a split second, the face of Mikado Sanzenin flashed in her mind. The feeling of being picked up against her will... **kissed** against her will. Ranma's first kiss. Taken. Stolen. By a **guy**. It still gave her nightmares from time to time, and just thinking about it made her skin crawl.

She swallowed hard, forcing herself to look back up at the doorway, where Nabiki's hand-me-down Furinkan uniform hung pressed and ready. *Ranma's* uniform, now. The first day of fall term was tomorrow. The last day she could pretend to cling to the life she knew was today. Ranma wondered if she could get away with calling out sick if only she gave in to the overwhelming urge to throw up.

Her further descent into despair was interrupted by a knock at the door of the unfurnished guest room. "Ranma? Can I come in?"

A quiet "*I guess*" was all the sullen girl sitting on the bedroll could get out.

The door slid open, and in stepped Akane, a concerned look on her face. "Hey. You okay? You didn't come out to dinner. We're all worried about you."

Ranma buried her face in her knees, hugging her legs tight. "I'm fine."

Akane sighed with concern, crossing her ankles and dropping to sit beside her betrothed on the floor. "You're **not** fine, Ranma. Everyone knows it. I know things are hard, but..."

Ranma exploded from her balled-up position, turning on her. "You know it's hard? You don't know *anything*. **None of you do!** None of you have ever had your whole identity snatched away in a blink. Everything you've ever done, **erased**. You don't have the slightest idea what it feels like!"

Uncharacteristically, Akane responded not by raising her temper to meet Ranma's, but with a soft hand on the redhead's shoulder. "You're right. We don't. But we're here for you anyway."

Ranma recoiled, ashamed of herself for having snapped when Akane was just trying to help. She finally allowed herself to make eye contact, and in an instant, she knew what had to be done. For all her anger issues, all her un-cute mannerisms, Akane was a good and kind person. She deserved better than the uncertainty of Ranma's new reality. Better than Ranma could give.

"Can I have a few minutes more alone, please?"

Akane nodded, standing. "Of course. Whatever you need." She exited through the door and slid it shut, pulling the dreaded school uniform back into Ranma's view.

"To hell with this," Ranma muttered under her breath, standing and making for her closet. She opened it, looking over its contents. After staying so long with the Tendo family, she had accumulated more belongings, but not much of consequence. Her wardrobe was more girls' clothes than guys' at this point, the product of a combination of shenanigans pulled to get free octopus puffs or gain advantages in a fight, and Kasumi's relentless determination over

the last few months to get Ranma to accept her femininity. Ranma's entire female persona had long been a sort of mask, like a Halloween costume she could put on when it suited her needs. It was the only way she'd been able to make peace with it. Now, the mask was permanent, whether she wanted it or not, and the boy she had once been was the one that felt more like a fantasy.

Avoiding the dresses and the ridiculous bunny suits, Ranma stuffed a few days' worth of relatively androgynous clothing and a map into her huge beige hiking backpack without bothering to fold either. She tightly wound her bedroll and strapped it to the top of the pack. Slinging it over one shoulder, she headed through the door toward the hall. Her pack pushed through the curtain formed by the hanging white and blue dress as she passed, and it fell to the floor. She saw no need to pick it up.

"I'm *leaving*."

Mr. Tendo leapt up from his shogi board. Ranma's father also looked up, but not before rearranging a few game pieces behind Soun's back.

"What are you talking about? It's a school night." It was only then that Soun noticed the backpack. "Oh."

Ranma nodded resolutely. "You only asked me and Pop to stay here so I could marry one of your daughters, and well..." She gestured to her body, letting her form finish the sentence her words could not. "I don't even know who I am anymore, but I know I don't belong here."

Akane entered the dining room from the hallway, immediately taking in the gravity of the scene. Her hands flew to her lips in horror. "Ranma, no! You **can't!** You can't just **leave!** Where will you go? How will you... **how will I...?**"

Soun held up his hand, gesturing for Akane to stop. "Son, I know you are confused right now, but think this through. You know you will always be welcome here with us."

Genma, having finished his cheating, made his way into the dining room from the porch and clapped his hand roughly on her shoulder with a confident laugh. "Ranma, my boy, don't be rash! This will all blow over, I'm sure of it!"

With a shriek that sounded less like a battle *kiai* and more like a primal roar, Ranma grabbed the first thing she could reach and in one deft motion, swung and released. Soun managed to duck before his dining room table flew past his head. Genma was not so lucky.

"Don't you **get it?!** I'm not your son, and I'm not your boy. Not anymore, and I'm never gonna be again. **Ever!** This is it now. This is who I am, and I hate it! **I HATE IT!**" She turned slightly to face her father as his head poked out from beneath the splintered furniture.

Her eyes flashed darkly, her chest heaving with every shred of anger, and hurt, and fear, and everything else she'd put on a brave face and bottled up for the last five months. "And **YOU!** You and your stupid training did this to me. You stole **everything** from me! My life, my family..." Her voice cracked slightly, swallowing back her sadness. "**Two** families now. This is **all your fault**, old man, and I will **NEVER** forget it!"

Her breathing began to slow as her rage subsided. The furious expression on her face melted into one of broken emptiness, as if she had shot her whole heart out of her chest like

a cannon and there was nothing left inside of her to fill the space. Kasumi and Nabiki watched from the kitchen door, transfixed but wordless. Akane started to approach, but Ranma's hollow words froze her in her tracks.

"I just can't do this anymore. I'm sorry. Akane, I... I'm sorry."

Without another word, she snatched her bag from the floor, slinging it over her shoulder as she ran. She sprinted through the side door and vaulted over the garden wall into the street beyond. Akane burst through the front door in pursuit, but the smaller girl was far too fast and had too great a head start. **"RANMA, WAIT! Come back!"**

Ranma did not turn. She just kept running. She had to. She had one shred of dignity left, and she was determined not to lose it.

Akane would not see her cry.

Bracing herself, Ranma cupped her hands under the faucet, splashing a bit of water onto her face. She kept her palms pressed to her mouth, trying to stifle the involuntary yelp of pain that she knew was coming. She shuddered tensely and gritted her teeth as the scalding liquid burned its way down her neck, finally and mercifully being caught in the collar of her red silk Chinese shirt. To anyone else, the water beginning to fill the steel sink would have been tepid at best – but not to her. Not anymore. *Not since...*

She shook her head, trying to evict the thought before it finished forming. No use going down that rabbit hole again. She looked in the mirror, brushing a few stray leaves from the flame-red braid that swayed over her right shoulder. *That's as good as it's gonna get*, she thought with a sigh, picking up a beige camping backpack that was way too big for her slender frame and strapping it over her shoulders. She felt so weak, she could barely lift it. Unlocking the restroom door, she pushed her way out into the crowd -- people hustling and bustling to reach their platforms in time to catch the trains to work. The ground rumbled a bit as a silver passenger train rocketed into position and slowed to a stop, its doors opening with a loud hiss.

“Chuo District, boarding now on platform eight,” came a robotic-sounding feminine voice from the tinny public address speakers overhead. Rather than heading for a train, however, she made for the concrete stairway and ascended into the bright sunlight of the city above.

Up at street level too, people darted every which way, trying to settle into their shops and offices in time to start the day. She noticed a woman in a green business suit and heels, hurriedly trying to finish a pack of vending machine rice balls on a bench near the sidewalk. Her gray leather briefcase was pinned against her body with her left elbow. Like everyone else on the street, she looked absolutely frantic with stress. She wondered if the lady with the rice balls knew how much worse it would be if she had nowhere to go at all - and no rice balls, to boot. Adjusting the weight of her backpack on her shoulders, she looked for the least crowded street and started walking.

Passing an okonomiyaki cart on the street as she walked, Ranma managed the beginnings of a smile, remembering her friend Ukyo and how supportive she had been about her decision, even though she thought it was a stupid idea. She was right, too. Ranma had stopped to say goodbye on her way out of Nerima, all those weeks ago. Ukyo had even managed to slip a little money into her backpack unnoticed, after she'd refused to accept it outright. The nascent smile receded as she remembered that, after nearly seven weeks homeless and alone, the money was almost gone. She needed a plan. Needed one before she left, really, but it was far too late to do anything about that now.

Something had to give, and fast.



"*Anything goes*, huh? Never heard of it." The giant of a man chuckled. "Sounds like what you call your style when you ain't got a style."

Ranma bristled, but tried to ignore the insult. "No, sir. It's a family tradition. It combines ancient techniques from all kinds of martial arts. We take the strongest moves from dozens of traditions and blend them into one." Also, some random dirty tricks and the occasional panty raid, but Ranma decided to leave that part of the school's legacy for another time.

The man's square jaw took on a condescending smirk as he straightened the black cloth belt at the waist of his gi. "I see. Well, we teach kempo here, so I don't know if you could be of much help as an instructor here. Sorry."

He started to turn away, but Ranma persisted. "Our tradition incorporates a few moves from kempo, mostly the tiger, crane and dragon forms. I've studied it." She inhaled deeply, summoning the courage for what needed to happen next. *Eleventh time's the charm, right?* "I could spar with you and show you, if you want?"

The sensei turned on his heel with a hearty laugh. "You aren't challenging my dojo, are you, kid?"

Ranma waved her hands defensively. "Of course not, sir! I just want a chance to prove myself."

He grinned in amusement, running his hand through his shoulder-length black hair. "Alright. Let's see what you got." He dropped into a loose fighting stance. "But none of that backwater shit. Kempo only."

Ranma nodded and took her position, keeping her hands in front of herself at all times. Before "it" happened, she could have taken the guy with her eyes closed. Now, only one thought pounded through her mind: *Don't get hit. Dear gods, don't get hit.*

She heeded her own advice, ducking under a quick, wild jab and stepping back. *Okay. This guy fights like Ryoga. I can work with that*, she coached herself. As he lunged forward with another heavy punch, Ranma went low, sweeping at his legs. The sensei took the hit on the shin, but lifted his leg from the mat and easily retained his balance. The guy was built like a tree trunk, and just the impact against his leg hurt her ankle a bit.

Focusing on defense - and on dodging rather than blocking - meant the fight was slow work for Ranma. She landed a punch here and a kick there, but nothing that showed any sign of wearing down her adversary. Meanwhile, she was already beginning to feel fatigue, probably owing to the fact that she hadn't eaten since yesterday. Ranma had to end the duel, and quickly. She thought of the Chestnuts Roasting on an Open Fire technique. She hadn't used it since that day on the mountainside. Still, it couldn't save her now; the terms of the fight had been set. A high kick from the sensei sailed harmlessly over her head, and she saw an opening. It was tight, but she had to try.

Darting in close, she landed four quick strikes in succession to the right side of his torso. Only then did she realize her mistake. The sensei continued to rotate his body, using the momentum of the missed kick to spin into a vicious elbow strike. The full force of it landed dead in Ranma's sternum, and she staggered back. Even a block was hard to grit through thanks to the Full-Body Cat's Tongue, but the impact of the sensei's elbow was like being hit in the ribs by a freight train. Still, she knew what she was fighting for. *I win this, or I don't eat.*

Somehow, she kept her feet.

Briefly.

The sensei rushed forward, delivering an overhand strike with a loud *kiai*. Ranma tried desperately to lift her arms to block, but it was too late. She caught the downward force of his fist right across her cheek, and her legs buckled under her. Her eyes watering, still gasping from the blow to the chest, she willed herself to stand, but she knew the fight was over. The sensei gave a shallow bow and turned to face his young students, who whooped and applauded at their teacher's emphatic dispatching of the interloper in their midst. He looked back over his shoulder at Ranma with a condescending smirk. "**Not bad**, kid. My girls' intermediate class is Wednesdays at ten. First lesson's free."

Ranma's face flushed in anger and humiliation as some thirty yellow belts cackled at her defeat. She managed to steady herself, rushing to the front of the building and grabbing her backpack and shoes without breaking stride. She didn't even stop to put them on before bursting through the door and making her escape.

She picked a direction and kept walking the length of the block, wanting to put a little distance between herself and the strip mall containing Sensei Fuku's kempo dojo before stopping to think. That had been the last martial arts school in the phone book. *Now, it's time to panic*. When other kids were learning math, and writing, and all that other boring crap that made them ready to get a job, Ranma was learning punches and kicks. Martial arts was all she knew. If she couldn't make a living with it, what was she going to do? She slumped in despair onto a curbside bench beside her bag, with nothing but her growling stomach to console her. A chill breeze brushed past her hypersensitive skin, causing her whole body to shiver. It was mid-November, and it was going to start getting really cold soon.

What options did she have left?

There was always the option of returning to the Tendo residence. *No, I can't. Not after the way I left. They'd never take me back. Even if they did, Pop would never let me live down the shame. Besides, Ryoga and Akane probably have five or six piglets on the way by now*, she mused darkly.

Ukyo? Sure, she would let her stay in a heartbeat, but then she would likely have... *expectations*, too. Plus, she'd see Akane and everyone else she knew almost every day. She shook the thought loose from her head. No, nowhere in Nerima would do. She had made her peace and said goodbye, and honor demanded that she stand by her decision, even though it hadn't worked out for her.

What about Mom? Ranma sighed at the thought. She barely remembered Nodoka Saotome, having not seen her since she was five years old, and a five-year-old boy, at that. Ranma wasn't even sure what city she lived in anymore. All she really knew for sure was the stories that Genma told, and they had made one thing abundantly clear – Nodoka Saotome would never accept that Ranma had left as her son and come home as her daughter. So much so in fact, Ranma's father had accepted - on behalf of both of them - an agreement to commit ritual suicide if Ranma didn't turn out sufficiently *manly*. Showing up on her mother's doorstep was as good as a death sentence.

Ranma looked up from her hands, where she had been absently running her fingers over the angry, raised scar jutting across her left wrist. The Amazon boy who had fought for Xian Pu's

hand had left her a memento of the worst day of her life, as if the entire rest of her body wasn't one, too. It wasn't a particularly busy street, but it was lunch hour at most of the nearby offices, so the sidewalks were full of colleagues in business attire looking for a place to grab a bite. More than a few bikes whizzed past her bench, most carrying takeout and rushing to deliver it hot, as well as the occasional car. With a loud pneumatic hiss, a lime green commuter bus with an advertisement for toothpaste plastered on the side released its brakes and began to move, its newly-boarded passengers having paid their fares and found their seats.

As the bus cleared the block, Ranma noticed a small hole-in-the wall bar across the street. It was housed in a two-story free-standing brick building that seemed inviting enough, if a little run down. She didn't look far enough to notice its name; she was far more distracted by the little red **NOW HIRING** sign in the front window. She nodded to herself and exhaled resolutely, shouldering her backpack. How bad could it be? Worst case, it sucked and she moved on with a little more money in her pocket.

Well, so much for my pride, Ranma thought as she waited for an opening in the traffic to cross the street. I can't hack it as a martial artist anymore, so now I guess the best I can hope for is being a freakin' waitress. Fuck, I hope this isn't one of those places where the girls have to take their clothes off. I'm desperate, but I don't think I can do... that.

She crossed the street briskly and pushed open the tinted glass door. The inside of the bar was set up as a kitschy little music venue, with a little triangular stage off in the corner. There was a small wooden podium for a hostess off to her immediate left. A long, well-kept wooden bar with a coated acacia countertop snaked its way along the right side of the establishment, with brass rails running along the bottom to give guests seated in the brown vinyl barstools a place for their feet. There was a break in the counter a meter or two wide, and the second, smaller counter had no stools in front of it. A blue slatted saloon-style door sat behind the twin counters, presumably heading to a back room. Behind both bars, the walls were covered in mirrors and lined with shelves containing varieties of liquor too numerous for Ranma to begin to count.

The wall on her left was lined with snug booth seating with cherry tables and red vinyl cushions, and a row of round cherry wood high-top tables surrounded by four chairs each divided the space in the middle. A few larger, round tables with seating for six dotted the narrow bar room at intervals. Neon signs advertising various libations dotted the walls, but none of them were currently turned on. Past the bar, the stage sat in the back left corner and the room opened up to the right, presumably as deeply into the building as the back room stretched. In the back corner area, a pool table with a purple felt top that had seen better days and a lone coin-operated arcade machine sat awaiting the day's guests. There was also a small plastic folding table on which was stacked a few pieces of electronic equipment and a monitor for running the karaoke station, with thick black cables taped to the floor as they snaked past the restroom doors to the stage.

Ranma craned her neck around the bar, setting her backpack down on the chair nearest to the front door. As far as she could tell, no one was present. **"Hello?"**

The saloon door swung open with a bang and a tall woman emerged. Probably somewhere in her mid-to-late fifties, she had shoulder-length raven hair with just the faintest hint of gray peeking out above her ears. She was dressed in blue jeans and a black tank top bearing the logo of some beer brand or another. She set the bucket she was carrying down on the floor behind the bar, wiping her brow with her forearm. "We're closed, ya know."

Ranma nodded. "I'm sorry. I saw the sign in the window? I can come back later if you're busy..."

The taller woman perked up a bit, seeming only now to take an interest in Ranma. She looked Ranma over intently, with a curious expression on her face. "You ever worked in a bar before, kiddo?"

Ranma shook her head, trying to hide a little cringe at having to answer in the negative. "No, but I've waited tables before, at an okonomiyaki place and a ramen cafe. I learn super quick, and I..."

The bar's owner raised her hand, interrupting the redheaded teen's thought. "How old are you?"

Ranma winced. She knew that the drinking age was twenty, but even if the law allowed younger people to work in places that served alcohol, she had no idea what the establishment's hiring policy was. *Screw it, desperate times and all that*, she thought. "I'll be twenty next Saturday." At least she hadn't lied about her birthday. If anyone decided to check her identification card, the photo of a black-haired boy would probably cause issues long before the year of birth did, she reasoned.

The older woman gave a contemplative nod, looking Ranma over again. Ranma wasn't sure if it was curiosity or suspicion she saw in the elder woman's eyes, but whether or not she bought Ranma's lie, the die was cast. "When could you start?"

Ranma smiled brightly, seeming to straighten up a little bit thanks to a combination of adrenaline and the first hope she'd had in weeks. "Right now, if you want."

Her answer was met with a huff and a smile from the bar's proprietress. "Eager. I like that. Alright, kid. Let's do this! We start setting up for the day at about noon. Be here around that time tomorrow?"

Ranma beamed. "Yes, of course! Thank you so much!" She bowed respectfully, waiting for a return gesture before grabbing her backpack and turning to reach for the brass handle of the glass double door.

"Hey! What's your name, anyway?"

"Ran..." Ranma gulped. How many times had some random freak showed up at the dojo with a claim of marriage or a challenge letter addressed to *Ranma Saotome*? Could she really afford that chaos upending her new life like it had the old? Did she really want to be found? There was only one thing to do, she resolved. Like everything else she had known, like everything else she used to be, the name had to be left behind.

"Ranko. Ranko... *Tendo.*"

They were more of a family to me than Pop ever was, she thought as she spat out the only other family name she could think of. *It's only right that I honor them.*

With a single nod and a wave, the woman behind the bar dismissed her. "See you tomorrow, then, Ranko Tendo. Welcome to the Phoenix."



She only had a few coins left on her, but something had to be done about her clothes. It was a choice between a clean shirt and one last meal from a vending machine, but she'd chosen to invest in making a good impression on her new boss. Ranma had only brought three outfits with her, and that was going to be a problem sooner than later, but at least for her first day she could show up clean.

She ducked into a nearby laundromat, heading to the ladies' room and locking the door. Figuring she'd put on the least professional outfit she had with her while the others got clean, she slipped out of her black gi pants and pulled her red shirt up over her head. She winced loudly as it passed over her face, and again when she looked up at the mirror and realized why. The area around her right eye, where the kempo sensei had dealt her that final blow, had turned black and purple. *No wonder the lady at the bar looked like she was taking pity on me.* Quickly donning a yellow tee shirt and a pair of light red - she refused to call them *pink* - overalls, she exited the bathroom and tossed all of her other clothes into the nearest available washing machine.

She sat on a bench near the washer she was using and rotated her shoulders with a grimace. There was a sore spot between her breasts that was just killing her. She wanted to tell herself it was from sleeping outside the last few weeks, or from the beatings she had taken at her many martial arts *job interviews*, but it wasn't, and she knew it. Even now, all these months later, the spot where Xian Pu's grandmother Koh Lon had poked her with a stick and changed her life forever still burned white hot. She wondered if it would ever stop.

When the bar's owner arrived at 11:30 the next morning, she found Ranma sitting on the sidewalk waiting for her. She'd already been there for nearly a half an hour; there was too much riding on a good first impression for Ranma, and there was no chance she was going to be late. Besides, she didn't have much else to do anyway.

The elder woman laughed, reaching toward the glass door with her key in hand. "You're early. Don't worry, we'll train that out of you." She wore a black leather jacket, her salt-and-pepper hair cascading just past the shoulders of it. She really was pretty, especially given her age. Ranma understood how she had been so successful in the entertainment business. The door sprung open with a *click*. "C'mon in. There's a spot in the back where you can leave your bag."

Ranma picked her backpack up from the stoop and pushed through the blue saloon door separating the bar area from the kitchen and back rooms. The back of the house was broken up into several small rooms. To her right, a closed door proclaimed itself to be the management office. To her left, there was a locked closet with a glass door. Ranma could see hundreds, maybe thousands, of liquor bottles inside. *This must be their stock area*, she thought. The walls were lined with posters for bands and bar products, with the occasional note for the staff.

Moving down the hallway, she found a passage on her right leading to a narrow staircase up to the second floor. Beyond that, a small industrial kitchen expanded in both directions. The back wall was equipped with a commercial cooktop and oven, two microwaves, and a bank of deep fryers behind a stainless steel prep counter lined with dry ingredients. A walk-in refrigerator with a large steel door dominated the wall to the right. The place was spotless. As she wandered back toward the front of the house, she found a little alcove to her right with a few coats hanging in it and a broom and mop leaning against the wall. Doffing her backpack with a groan and propping it precariously in the cramped little space, she cracked her neck loudly as she walked back to the front.

"Hey there, kiddo! You ready to get started?" The bar's owner waved to Ranma from the center of the room, where she was refilling a napkin dispenser on one of the large round tables.

Ranma nodded eagerly, putting on a bright smile. *If I'm gonna have to do this, I'm gonna do everything I can to be good at it. I can't afford to screw this up.* "Yes, ma'am! Where do you want me?"

The middle-aged woman in the black leather jacket gave Ranma an easy smile of reassurance. She could see the nervousness in her new employee's face, however much the kid might have been trying to hide it. "Alright! Over in those metal bins there on the bar, you'll find a bunch of lemons and limes. We need to get those cut into quarters, and then the oranges there into thinner slices. You think you can handle that?"

Ranma picked up a long, slender knife from the bar, spinning it in her fingers with a dexterity only a lifelong martial artist could muster. "I **guess** I can take a crack at it."

The woman shook her head and laughed. "Alright, smartass, I get the point. Let me know when you're done; I'll be in the kitchen getting the prep table set." With one foot through the double doors, she stopped. "Shit, I almost forgot! My name's Hana. Sorry about that, Ranko."

Ranma looked up from her fruit without her hands stopping their slicing motion. "No problem. Pleased to meet you, Hana. And hey, thanks again for this."

In less than ten minutes, Ranma had cleared the lemons and was halfway through the limes when the front door swung open with a bang and three women walked in. The first, a tallish, slender girl in her late twenties in a crimson, long-sleeved silk button down shirt and a black flared skirt, pulled off her sunglasses. Her blonde hair framed her face in a sort of bob cut that reminded Ranma a little of Nabiki. "**Whoa**, hey, we got a new girl!"

The second to enter was a shorter, stubbier girl in a pair of jeans and a black corset top, her shoulder-length hair braided into two pigtails and dyed a shade of electric blue that made Ranma think of the cotton candy at the Nerima fair. She looked to be the youngest of the three, though probably still four or five years Ranma's senior. "Hey hey! Welcome aboard!"

Finally, a brunette in an orange minidress peeked out from behind the pair. She was wearing just a little too much makeup, and from the looks of it, putting it on it took the time she would have otherwise spent brushing her hair. "Mama, you here?"

The elder stateswoman of the bar popped out of the kitchen, now wearing a black vinyl dishwasher's apron over her white tee shirt and having removed her leather jacket. "Morning, girls. Say hello to Ranko. She'll be joining us today. Take it easy on her, huh?"

The brunette giggled. "Oh, like you did for us?"

Hana cracked a smile, scoffing slightly. "That was different. You needed a kick in the butt once in a while."

The brunette, who looked to be in her mid-to-late twenties, made her way through the gap between the main and service bars and gave Hana a tight hug. "You know that's right." She turned to face Ranma with a welcoming smile. "Hey there, Ranko. I'm Izumi. Good to meet ya." She opened a dishwasher mounted under the bar, beginning to stack clean highball glasses on the countertop.

The girl with the blue pigtails waved nervously, still standing near the doorway. "Hiya! I'm Mei." Ranma gave her a polite smile as she bifurcated the final lime in the bin.

The blonde took a seat at the bar, looking Ranma over analytically. "Yui." Ranma meekly turned her cheek, trying in vain to hide her black and purple eye from the girl's examination. She extended her right hand over the bar, and Ranma wiped the fruit juice from her hands with a nearby bar towel before accepting it with her left. As she did, Yui didn't shake her hand as much as she glanced over the raised scar jutting across Ranma's left wrist, letting her eyes linger just long enough to hope Ranma didn't notice her looking.

"It's good to meet all of you. I know I'm new here, but I'll do whatever I can to help. Just point me at whatever needs done!" Ranma did her best to smile. Yui nodded with a thin smile of her own, but her furrowed brow and pursed lips gave Ranma a moment's pause. *Is she upset about something? Did I do something wrong already?*

Mei closed the distance to the bar, smiling meekly at Ranma. "Hey, can I show you something real quick?" She extended her hand, palm up and fingers open. Nodding in understanding, Ranma flipped the knife around so that the blade was in her hand and the handle stuck out, pressing it carefully into Mei's palm.

The cerulean-haired girl picked up an orange. "You're doing the slices like this, which is great and all," she said, shaving a few thin slices of fruit onto the bar. "But, if you want them to come out really pretty, try this." She pushed the knife through the flesh of the orange again, this time rotating her wrist ever so slightly as the blade passed through it. What fell from the orange this time was not a flat slice, but a wavy, almost spiral piece of art. Mei set the knife on the bar, the handle facing Ranma. "You wanna try, Ranko?"

Ranma copied her movements perfectly - years of analyzing the moves of opposing martial artists not totally going to waste - and finished the orange with six more spirals. "How's that?"

Mei made a show of performing a little golf clap, giggling brightly. "Look at that, girls! She's a natural!"

While Izumi finished her pyramid of highballs and changed focus to martini glasses, Yui and Hana were huddled together in the back by the pool table. Ranma couldn't hear what they were saying, but from their body language, she could tell that she was the subject of their conversation. It made her nervous, but she tried not to focus on it, accepting more pointers and a second pair of hands from Mei to finish the bin of garnishes for the evening's service.

The fruit-cutting work finished, Mei slipped behind the bar, starting to pick up and inspect each bottle of liquor displayed on the shelves mounted to the mirrored back wall. If a bottle was more than half empty, she noted it on a small pad of paper she'd pulled from a drawer.

Yui and Hana walked over together, taking seats next to each other on barstools on the patrons' side of the bar. Hana spoke first. "Okay. Obviously, we're going to need to rearrange what everybody's doing now that Ranko has joined us. Yui, you're bartending, of course. Izumi, we're going to have you on table service, with Mei running the service bar. Ranko, you're going to do what we call bar backing tonight. Have you heard of it?"

Ranma shook her head. She'd barely even *set foot* in a bar before yesterday, usually only when she needed a place to duck in and use the bathroom.

"OK," Hana began. "It sounds simple, but it's really not. Basically, when the place gets busy, Yui is going to be slammed three and four people deep back there. At the service bar, where Mei is, people don't order their own drinks; she'll be making whatever the people at the tables order through Izzi. Both of them are going to need to make drinks as fast as they can. As the bar back, your job is to make sure they don't run out of anything they need. They won't have time to cut more fruit, wash glasses, get ice, any of that, so they're going to be counting on you to keep them supplied so they don't have to slow down. They'll let you know when they need something, but keep an eye out and try to be proactive if you can. Eventually, we'll try you out on other jobs - I know you said you've waited tables before - but this is the quickest way to get you exposed to all the moving parts around here."

Ranma nodded in understanding. "I'll do my best," she replied in as chipper a tone as she could manage.

The sound of a doorbell came from the back room. "That must be the grocery delivery guy,"

Yui announced. "I'll take care of it." She disappeared back behind the blue saloon door as Mei pushed through it in the opposite direction with a large armload of full liquor bottles.

As Mei began to restock the wells behind the bar, Ranma saw that several more bottles had been pulled out from the locked storage room but not carried in and rushed to gather them, bringing them to Mei with a widening smile. *I hate to admit it, but so far, this is actually kind of... fun?*

A loud clatter came from the back room, followed by Yui's frustrated voice. "**Aggh! Son of a...**" She burst into the area behind the bar, a mop in her hand, and Ranma cringed. The sound she heard could only have been Yui struggling to get the mop out from behind the massive backpack she'd left in the alcove. She whistled loudly as she emerged from the back. "Oi, Izzi! Can you get the floors? I'm running way behind." Tossing the mop, Yui turned back into the narrow back area and made her way toward Hana's office. Izumi caught the mop in mid-air and set about wetting it from a sink behind the service bar. Ranma watched the steaming water pour from the faucet in terror, silently praying her thanks that it hadn't been her that Yui had asked.



The rest of the afternoon was filled with instruction about cash registers and liquor names and ice machines. The girls were all fun and seemed to enjoy working together, and there were no shortage of giggles between them. Ranma blushed periodically at the realization that she'd participated in more than a few herself. At long last, the first customers began to trickle in. Ranma stood at the entrance to the back room as if she were a soccer goalkeeper, her eyes flashing constantly between all of her various areas of responsibility. Not a single glass had left the stack yet - there was no way it could be empty - but Ranma was determined to excel in whatever role she'd been assigned. Her growling stomach reminded her that her life all but depended on it.

With what must have been shocking agility in her coworkers' eyes, Ranma darted in and out of their workspaces with ease, somehow managing to keep everything topped off despite never getting in the way of the older girls. Mei noticed the only thing she was a little slow on was washing the glasses; for some reason, she seemed to be doing everything in her power to avoid putting her hands in a sink full of warm water. *Oh well, everybody's squeamish about something*, she thought to herself.

While the stage in the corner went unused, the sound system in the bar never stopped. They played a variety of pop and rock songs on an almost jukebox-like rotation, and Ranma found that the high-energy beat lent an extra spring to her step. She was glad for it, because once the rush had gotten started, it had been relentless. Ranma had only taken one break in the first few hours, and only because Hana had offered her something to eat. The way Yui looked at her as she devoured the pizza she was given made Ranma entirely self-conscious. She guessed it probably wasn't ladylike to eat at that speed, and winced with regret at the realization that it might have been seen as impolite, but she hadn't eaten in two days and didn't remember the last time she'd actually been full.

At one point, Izumi went on a short break and entrusted Ranma with a few of her tables. By

the time she'd returned, the patrons had finished and Ranma had already cleared the tables for the next guests. While Mei and Izumi didn't miss an opportunity to offer her encouragement or advice, it seemed that every time Ranma looked up, Yui's eyes were on her. She didn't know what to make of the head bartender, or why she seemed so intent on Ranma's every move, but it really worried her. She didn't seem upset or anything, just intently focused on her new coworker for reasons Ranma couldn't fathom. Ranma made it a point to smile brightly at her every time she caught her looking, in the hopes of disarming whatever might be building in her head.

Hana, meanwhile, was barely seen behind the bar. She spent most of the evening in the front of the house, welcoming guests and ensuring their needs were met. Between her frequent check-ins with Ranma to ensure she had no questions and was doing alright, she helped Izumi clear tables when she could, and carried the occasional drink when her hands were full. For the most part, she remained hands-off to see how her crew handled a Saturday night with a full complement of staff.

So far, she was fairly impressed.

Just when Ranma thought the night would never end, the last customer walked out and Izumi flipped the little sign in the window to the **CLOSED** side, deadbolting both of the glass doors. Not since the last time her father had made her lug boulders up a mountain for some stupid training thing had Ranma been so tired. She slumped into the closest chair at table eight, feeling her body relax with a long, slow exhale.

Izumi came up behind her, putting an arm around her shoulder with a little squeeze. “So, hey ladies, what do we think of Ranko tonight?” Izumi whooped and clapped, and Mei enthusiastically joined in. Yui and Hana were still in the back, where they had been mired in more conspiratorial conversations since just after last call, but they emerged at Izumi’s prompting. Yui gave the new hire a little round of applause as well. Hana was all smiles, but did not clap because she had a clipboard in her hand.

“Seriously, honey. Great job today,” Izumi said warmly. Ranma smiled up at the brunette, feeling at least a little accomplished. She found it difficult to be too happy though, as she was still worried about whatever it was that Yui and Hana were up to.

As Mei finished wiping down the bar top with a clean rag, Hana slid into the chair across from the redhead. “Hey, Ranko, can we talk for a second?”

Ranma nodded, eyeing Hana with some measure of concern. Her nerves were getting the best of her now, and she fidgeted in her seat a little.

Hana looked up over the clipboard, and she must have seen the poor girl jittering. “Take it easy, kiddo. I just gotta get some information from you for the employee file.” Ranma swallowed hard with an audible *gulp*.

This is even worse, she thought, tapping her foot anxiously under the table.

“Okay, let’s start off. Real basic stuff. Name’s Ranko... you said your last name was *Tendo*, right?”

Ranma nodded nervously, her eyes darting around the room for signs of suspicion in the other girls’ eyes.

“Got it. Birth date?” Ranma gave a date of November twenty-fifth, remembering to subtract two from the year at the last possible second.

A whoop came from behind the bar. “Nice! Hey, Yui! Saturday’s the new kid’s birthday!” Mei giggled.

“Alright. I take it you’re a Japanese citizen, so no worries there?”

Ranma nodded again, meekly, in response to Hana’s latest query, and the bar owner’s pen moved some more behind the clipboard. “Great! Almost done. And, what’s your address?”

Ranma froze. *Oh, man. What are they gonna think, knowing I’ve been sleeping in parks and*

stuff the last few weeks? Are they gonna think less of me, like I'm some loser? I mean... they're not wrong, I guess. Will they even want me? She slumped down in her chair. "Well, I... ah..."

Hana nodded sadly. "Yeah, that's pretty much what we thought." Ranma looked up from her despair, puzzled. "Don't blame me," the proprietress continued. "Yui spotted it first."

The blonde had made her way out of the back room without Ranma having noticed, and was now standing behind the new hire's chair. "You've got leaves all over your back. You're carrying a camping backpack with a sleeping mat thing, and you felt the need to bring it here with you because you don't have anyplace else to leave it. You ate like you've been starving for a week. If you were trying to hide it, you... kinda suck at it, blockhead."

Ranma wanted to crawl under the table. She wished she could say she'd never been so humiliated, but lately that seemed to just invite a new low to lurk just around the corner. Hana sighed, putting the clipboard down on the table. Ranma's eyes darted to it and found that the top page contained a crossword puzzle, with a little abstract doodle off to the side.

What had been nervousness became panic. Clearly, her situation was going to be an issue for them if they had made such a big deal about it. Her eyes wide, she racked her brain for anything she could do or say to salvage the situation. If she couldn't even hold a job as a bar helper, she was well and truly sunk.

It was then that Hana reached across the table, covering Ranma's hand with her own and patting it to focus the teen's attention. "Hey, hey, hey. Ranko. Look at me. **Look** at me, baby. Everything's *okay*, honey. **Relax.**" Something about the woman's voice, her presence, reassured Ranma, and she quieted herself at least somewhat. "Listen, the girls and I have been talking. You really impressed us today. We think you're going to do great here. But, baby, we can't have you out on the streets like that. It's not safe for you."

Ranma nodded, following along. While she was pretty sure she could still handle the odd pervy vagrant, and had had to do so more than once since she left Nerima, she appreciated her boss's concern nonetheless.

After a sip from her brown beer bottle, Hana continued. "So, anyway, we keep a little studio apartment upstairs. It's not much; we mostly just use it for quick changes and if one of us needs to crash for a while after a long night, but nobody lives up there. If you like..." Ranma noticed that as Hana spoke, Izumi, Yui and Mei had formed a semicircle behind her chair. "You're welcome to use it for a while if you want to."

Ranma blushed. She could not believe the kindness being shown to her, but she couldn't be a freeloader again. Not after how things ended with the Tendo family. "*Thank you,*" she squeaked, "but really, I'm fine. I don't mind. It's not so bad." As she finished her sentence, the walls of the bar shook with a loud peal of thunder from outside. It had been so loud and so busy throughout the evening that none of the women had noticed it was storming.

Hana pursed her lips. "Okay, and now I'm **not asking.** Come on, honey."

She stood and offered Ranma her hand, but before Ranma could get out of her chair, Yui stepped forward. "Mama, let me get her settled?"

Hana nodded. "I think that's a great idea. Good night, Ranko."

With cheery assents from Mei and Izumi, Yui put her arm around the shorter girl's shoulders. "C'mon, you."

Ranma blushed furiously at being catered to after weeks of living rough. She felt terrible as she considered how distrusting she had been of Yui and Hana's conversations, and horribly guilty at the idea of living off of someone else's generosity again. On the other hand, she did have a job at the Phoenix. She wasn't freeloading; it would be no different than when Ukyo offered her a place to stay above her restaurant. Maybe she'd just stay the night, so she wasn't stuck out in the rain. It hadn't really stormed much since Ranma left home, but the thought of having to walk, let alone sleep, in a deluge made every cell of her hypersensitive skin stand on end.

Her backpack slung over her shoulder, she followed Yui up the narrow stairs to the left. The door at the top wasn't locked, and Yui pushed it open. "Well, here you go. Make yourself at home." Yui stepped forward to allow Ranma to enter and take in the space.

It was indeed a small apartment, probably not much bigger than the Tendo guest room, and it was fairly sparsely decorated. A tiny cooktop, a microwave and a half-sized refrigerator were crammed into one corner. Two narrow doors took up most of the east wall. Centered on the window directly ahead of her stood a twin-sized bed, sticking out into the center of the room. It had a fairly plain purple comforter, two small pillows, a headboard made of hollow aluminum painted white and bent into a few basic but dainty patterns, and a footboard to match. A small, white-painted nightstand and a round pine table with two chairs rounded out the furnishings. The air smelled faintly of flowers.

Ranma's eyes widened. She couldn't believe her good luck. *What the heck did I do to deserve all this? Do Hana and the others want something from me? What's the catch? When's the other shoe going to drop?* She tried not to get too excited in case things went south, but she had to admit, she couldn't wait to try out that bed. Her feet ached in ways she didn't know existed, and she honestly couldn't remember the last time she'd slept on a mattress. She kicked off her shoes and set her backpack on the hardwood floor next to the front door, which Yui closed behind them.

Yui motioned to the two doors on her right. "The one on the left is the bathroom, the other's the closet. There's a few outfits in there that the girls and I have left here over time; if anything fits you, you're welcome to borrow it."

Ranma looked up at her coworker skeptically, but hopefully. "Are you guys **sure** about this? I really..."

The blonde shushed her with an open palm and a smile. "You heard Mama. If she says you stay, you stay. There's no argument to be had about it."

Ranma sat on the bed, stifling a giggle as her butt sank into the soft mattress a little. "Well, thank you. All of you. I hope I'm going to make you all proud."

Her comment earned a more earnest smile than Ranma had seen from Yui thus far, and the tall blonde pulled up a chair from the dining table to a spot next to the bed. "Of that, Ranko, I have **no** doubt."

Ranma fidgeted with her hands a little, not really sure how to conduct herself. She didn't exactly have a lot of experience at the whole *girl talk* thing, other than an occasional

conversation with Akane where Ranma thought her once-fiancée might find it easier to discuss a difficult subject with a girl. “Why do you call Hana *Mama*?”

Yui smiled a bit wistfully, looking around the room as if she were watching the ghosts of the past dance around on the wallpaper. “Well, kiddo, here’s the thing. Where you’re sitting right now? All of us sat there at one time or another. Hana took us all in and helped us find our way. We all had something to run from, and she refused to give up on any of us. She’s the mother none of us really ever had. She’s good people – the **best**. Over time, we’ve kind of become a little family, the five of us. Oh yeah, there’s Ayako too – you’ll meet her one of these days. She’s the oldest of us, but she got married a few weeks ago and moved out to Yokohama with her husband. That’s why we had an opening – which reminds me, tomorrow, make sure you take that sign out of the window, yeah?”

Ranma rocked back. She couldn’t believe what she was hearing. She wasn’t sure if her gloom despite this incredible turn of events was because she felt awkward for being pitied, because she felt guilty for accepting the charity of people who had themselves struggled, because she sympathized with her coworkers for having all been through similar situations to the one she found herself in now without the benefit of a childhood spent living out of a bag, or if it was just the sea of pent-up fears and worries that had finally begun to crest. Maybe all of it combined.

“What brought you all here, if I can ask?”

Yui scoffed a little, shaking her head as if admonishing herself for not expecting the obvious followup question. “Well, Izzi... she got pregnant at her 18th birthday party, and the shitbag guy bailed on her. She was alone with a young son when she first came. But now, she’s seeing a great guy named Kaito, and he’s amazing with little Hoshi. She’ll probably be the next one getting hitched at this rate.” She chuckled. “As for Mei, it was drugs, real bad. Man, the first month, she was so sick, but Mama stayed with her through the whole thing, got her clean, and she’s been able to stay that way. We’re all super proud of her.”

Ranma nodded softly, the new context for the compassion her coworkers had shown her crashing into her like a wave of sledgehammers. “The other one... *Ayako*, you said her name was? What was her deal?”

The blonde chuckled. “Compared to the rest of ‘em, Aya got off easy in the trauma department. She just had sticky fingers, and Mama had to save her from the cops a bunch of times.”

“I guess that just leaves you,” Ranma said, leaving the unasked question hanging in the air as she leaned over on the bed, nudging Yui’s forearm playfully.

Yui blushed, nervously rubbing her wrist through her sleeve. “Me? *Pshaw*. I was **fine**, Mama just needed somebody cute to tend bar.”

Ranma smirked disbelievingly. “Fine, fine. Keep your secrets.”

Yui turned to her, and while her expression turned more serious, it was painted with compassion and care. It reminded Ranma a lot of Kasumi. “More importantly, what about **you**, Ranko? You don’t have to tell me if you don’t want to, but I’m here if and when you do.”

Ranma had only known this girl for a few hours, but she wanted to tell her everything.

Jusenkyo, the love hexagon-or-however-many-sides-it-had, the Cat's Tongue thing, all of it. She wanted somewhere to put it all, even just for a minute, but she was certain that there was no way Yui would believe her. She thought maybe she could say enough without saying too much.

"Sheesh, where do I start? Um, well, my pop was like, super strict about wanting me to... take over the family business. I mean, I wanted to and everything, but with him it was like, all training, all the time. We left home when I was like five, and he started taking me all over to... ya know, show me parts of the business and stuff. I haven't seen my mom since." She fidgeted a little, not sure how to broach the next part. "Thing is, Pop had this best friend, see, and they got the genius idea that one of Pop's kids and one of his should get married, and, well, I'm an only child. So, that pretty much settled things for me."

Yui cringed, crinkling her nose and recoiling in disgust. "An arranged marriage? People still do that? Ugh! **Gross!** Well, I hope he was decent, at least."

Ranma gulped hard. **He? That** was not a conversation she was prepared to have - not yet, at least. "Ak... my... was really sweet sometimes, and really cute sometimes, and really violent and untrusting sometimes. It was... complicated. We might've been able to make it work, *maybe*, but then I... got hurt, and everything started changing for me. I wasn't sure what to do, I was confused and scared and depressed and I needed time and I needed help, and Pop and his friend and everybody just insisted that I keep on like nothing ever happened and I just couldn't do it. I tried, Yui. I swear I did. I couldn't do it anymore. I..."

The touch of Yui's hand on hers interrupted her train of thought. Yui's slender fingers curled around Ranma's left hand and wrist, sympathy filling her eyes. "You don't have to say anything else, honey. I understand." Her voice was soft and soothing.

Ranma's eyes welled and she turned away slightly, hiding the black eye that had been left as a souvenir from her humiliation at the dojo. *I can't do this*, she admonished herself. *I can't. Gotta suck it up. Gotta be strong. Can't let them see weakness. I can't afford to make myself vulnerable. That's how you get hurt. Fuck, it feels good to just have somewhere to go, and someone to talk to about everything, though.* Her body quaked slightly as she fought to stem the tide, and she only looked back to Yui when she felt her coworker gently squeezing her hand.

"Ranko, it's okay. You're okay now. You're safe here with us."

Ranko. The name she'd chosen so she could bury her male half, or at least try to. But Yui didn't know she'd ever been a boy. To Yui, she was just another girl. And girls were allowed to cry.

Ranma clung to her new friend's arm, and the dam broke.

Ranma sat up, stretching. She hadn't slept that soundly in ages, and it felt good. She dared not to guess what time it was; she and Yui had stayed up talking until at least four or five in the morning. As long as she wasn't late for work, though, she didn't mind - she had nowhere else to be. She slid out from under the purple comforter, pulling it back into place, and headed for the narrow bathroom. It was a closet of a space decorated all in light blue, with a combination shower stall and bathtub and a toilet crammed in a narrow space between it and the countertop. Ranma looked at her face in the mirror mounted over the ivory sink, cringing slightly. The purple welt surrounding her right eye showed no signs of dissipating.

She looked over the shower nervously. She hadn't had a proper bath in weeks; the water in the public baths was far too hot for her Cat's Tongue-sensitive skin to handle. Cautiously, she turned the knob below the shower head, spinning it all the way to the left and jumping back quickly to avoid being burned. Using her palm to test the temperature of the air, she slowly approached the stream of water raining from the shower head until she was confident it was cold enough to be safe. Tossing the blue silk shirt and black gi pants she'd worn to work the day before to the floor, she tentatively stuck her hand in the shower. A quiet little yelp escaped her, much though she tried to stifle it. It was uncomfortably cold, but it beat being burned. She stepped over the porcelain edge and into the bathtub, wrapping her arms around her body and shivering for a few moments until her body adjusted to the temperature - at least, as well as it was going to - and began to get herself clean.

A few moments later, the frigid water incentivizing her to be quick, Ranma stepped out of the bathtub and wrapped herself in a soft blue towel. However awful most sensations were on her skin of late, the good sensations were amplified too, and the soft cotton enveloped her in a sense of comfort and warmth. Toweling herself off, she walked out into the main room of the little apartment and unzipped her backpack. Pulling out her red-and-black outfit and her totally-not-pink overalls, she grimaced. She could dress like a child, or she could wear the same clothes she had on for her interview two days ago. It was clear that the women she worked with understood her situation by now, but still, she didn't want to present herself as too much of a pity case. As she vacillated on a decision, she remembered Yui's offer of the clothes in the closet.

Pulling the narrow door open, Ranma surveyed the contents of the little closet. It was clear that what Yui said was true; the disparate sizes and styles made it obvious that the clothing belonged to no fewer than three of the four women. Ranma knew immediately that Hana's clothes would be far too big for her, and Mei's far too small, and that left a handful of articles that could have belonged to Yui or Izumi. *Of course*, she thought. They were the two with the girliest preferences in clothes - at least, as far as she'd seen. To her dismay, no pants were to be found among the outfits she'd fit in; she could always wear her gi pants with one of the shirts, though.

After a few moments of consternation, she settled on a greenish-gray casual polyester dress with long sleeves. It was a bit more conservative than the others, making Ranma think it was probably Yui's, but the hemline would have left much less to the imagination on the taller woman than it did on her. She looked herself over in the full-length mirror mounted to the back of the closet door. *Not great, but not bad*, she thought to herself. *At least, not as dresses go*. She turned her head to face the mirror more directly, but when her blackened

eye came into view, she cringed and inhaled through her teeth. “*Maybe not so much from that angle,*” she mumbled quietly to herself as she turned her head back to a more flattering position that hid the evidence of her defeat at the kempo dojo across the street.

Slipping on her shoes, she quietly crept downstairs. The bar was empty, of course; it would still be a few hours before Hana and the others arrived. It was a little surreal, the lingering silence and stillness in a place that had been so replete with music and revelry just a few hours before. She slipped into one of the empty booths, just looking around the place. As she did, she felt a sense of purpose and, dare she say, *pride*, that she hadn’t really experienced since the Tendo dojo. Shortly after arriving at Mr. Tendo’s home, she had mentally shouldered the responsibility to look after the place that had taken her in. She expected that she would come to feel that way at the Phoenix as well, and was in fact already starting to.

She lost track of how long she’d soaked in the peaceful quiet and serene solitude when she heard the click of a key in the glass front door. She turned, expecting to see Hana, but Izumi entered instead, carrying a white plastic bag as well as her purse. “Oh hi! Morning, Ranko!” She waved, smiling brightly.

“Hey there,” Ranma replied as she returned her coworker’s wave.

Izumi made her way to Ranma’s booth, her yellow platform heels echoing loudly in the empty space as they struck the hardwood floor. She straightened the gold-colored skirt of her dress and slid into the bench opposite Ranma. “How’d you sleep?”

Ranma blushed. “Like a rock. I never knew this kind of work was so exhausting!”

Izumi laughed. “Yeah, Mama must have seen something special in you. Starting you on a Saturday night? Talk about ***trial by fire!*** You did great, though.”

The redhead’s blush deepened. “Well, thanks.” She smiled a little coyly, and looked down at the table. When she did, the bruising around her eye came into clear view.

Izumi recoiled a little, and gestured to Ranma’s face. “Does it hurt?”

Ranma shrugged, turning her face away. “A little. Nothing I’m not used to.”

The older girl shook her head and took Ranma’s hand, almost forcefully. “**No.** You listen to me. This is ***not*** the kind of thing you’re supposed to ***get used to,*** okay?! You trust me on this.”

Ranma wanted to tell her that she’d been getting in fights since she was six, and also wanted to ask what had happened to Izumi to cause her emphatic reaction, but decided neither was appropriate at the moment. Instead, she just nodded in appreciation of her coworker’s sentiment.

Izumi stood from the booth and walked to the closest freestanding table, pulling out a chair but not sitting in it. “C’mere a second.”

Wondering what was wrong with the seat she already had, Ranma complied. Izumi set her little black clutch on the table and opened it. “Let’s see what we can do about this, huh?”

Ranma looked up at her, confused. "About what?"

Without answering, Izumi slipped her hand into her purse, withdrawing a small tan bottle with a silver cap and twisting it open. She dabbed a little of its milky contents onto a cotton ball and, ever so gently, touched it to the darkened skin surrounding Ranma's right eye. Izumi's repeated dabs felt like punches in their own right on Ranma's sensitive and wounded cheek, but she did her best to hide it, focusing instead on holding still while Izumi finished her work.

"Well, it's not perfect, but it's better, anyway." Izumi handed her a round compact mirror and Ranma gazed into it. While true, you could still tell that the injury was there, it was no longer obvious; she had to look for it to see it. Ranma blushed furiously at the thought of wearing makeup, and even more so at the thought of having had it applied by another girl. She'd only done it once before, when Akane and Ranma had their skating match. She shuddered, remembering everything else that had happened that day. She could still feel the viscous concealer's presence on her skin, but she refused to let it make her self-conscious; indeed, the whole reason Izumi had put it there was so that she could be less so.

With a disarming smile, Izumi took Ranma's braided pigtail in her fingers. "May I?" Ranma just shrugged. She didn't know what her new stylist had in mind, but she'd already come this far, she guessed. "Long hair is a girl's secret weapon, you know." She pulled at the string restraining the cord of still-damp crimson hair until it began to give way. With her fingers, she shook the braids loose, taming down the wilder strands that had fled in random directions to escape their long bondage. She carefully coaxed Ranma's wavy red hair toward her cheek, further obscuring the right side of her face. "There. Good as new."

Ranma glanced in the mirror again, and needed a double take. Her injury was now completely concealed, but beyond that, she was surprised to see that she actually looked... kind of *cute*. A muted "wow" was all Ranma could muster.

Izumi smirked with satisfaction at a job done well, snapping the compact mirror closed emphatically with a loud clack. "My work here is done." Ranma tittered involuntarily at her mannerisms, and gave her a playful little clap of appreciation.

Izumi grinned impishly, leaning into the moment. "Ah, my public *adores* me," she affected with an exaggerated posh accent. She rested her chin on her middle fingernail, framing her cheek with her thumb and index finger in a mock model pose, but could only hold it for a few seconds before bursting out in laughter.

Both girls were still giggling when the front door swung open, and they looked up to see Yui and Mei entering the bar. Mei seemed surprised to see them there so early, but Yui grinned broadly. "Well, it looks like somebody's having fun! Morning, girls!"

Izumi waved as Mei headed for the back room to set down her things, and Yui strode to the table to join the other girls. She was wearing a shiny silver shirt with long sleeves, the first three buttons left undone, and a pair of black nylon slacks. A matching silver headband kept her blonde hair out of her eyes. She slowly walked around Ranma's chair, inspecting her almost proudly. "You clean up good, kiddo."

Ranma blushed, gesturing to Izumi. "I'm just the canvas; she's the artist."

Izumi waved her off with the back of her hand. "On the contrary. The masterpiece was already there; I merely helped to reveal it."

Yui shook her head and rolled her eyes with a grin. "Alright there, Michelangelo." She turned her head back to Ranma. "That dress looks great on you. You like it?"

Ranma shrugged a bit and nodded. She guessed it actually was pretty okay. It didn't scratch at her skin quite so much, and she didn't feel half-naked in it.

Yui smiled. "I'm glad. Keep it, then. Never really liked how it fit me anyway."

Ranma's face flushed, but she bobbed her head in assent. "Thanks, Yui."

The four young women set about their tasks, Ranma mostly following the instructions she had been given the day before. They were halfway finished with their prep work already, far ahead of schedule, by the time Hana showed up. She wore dark sunglasses that pinned back her long black hair, and for a moment she seemed like she was fretting about something, but whatever it was melted from her face when she looked up and saw the girls laughing and working together. She walked in quietly, observing them for as long as she could without being noticed.

"Morning, Mama," Mei finally announced in a singsong voice. Izumi, still chewing the last bite of a bagel as she refilled a salt shaker, waved to her with her fingertips. Yui walked out of the back room, smiling at the older woman, and silently gestured with her neck toward the swinging door she'd just exited. She knew who Hana was looking for on that particular morning.

She found Ranma stacking plastic appetizer baskets near the prep line, a little bit of a skip in her step as she hummed a song quietly to herself. In every way, from her outfit and hair to her mannerisms and the erasure of the bruise that yesterday covered half her face, she looked like a completely different person from the one she met not forty-eight hours ago. *And that's why I do this*, she thought to herself proudly. "**Good morning**, Ranko!"

Ranma's back was turned to the door when she spoke, and she whirled around with a thousand-watt smile at the sound. "Good morning, miss Hana!"

Hana stepped further into the kitchen, looking around at her immaculate surroundings. They weren't set to open the doors for another two hours, but Hana thought they could probably start service right at that moment if they'd wanted to. "Well, if the four of you keep **this** up, I can retire."

Yui's voice echoed between the white tiled walls in the hallway behind her. "Don't you dare, Mama! You know we can't run this joint without you."

Hana chuckled and held up her hands in mock surrender. "Alright, alright. I guess I'll stay. So, Ranko, how was last night? Settling in okay? Do you need anything?"

Ranma smiled gratefully. She hadn't decided whether she was going to stay upstairs beyond the one night, but she was getting closer and closer to it as the day went on. "I'm just fine. Thank you again, for everything. Really." She offered a quick bow.

Izumi bustled into the kitchen, placing her hand on Hana's shoulder to warn her she was about to pass her in the narrow doorway. "Scuse me, Mama, I don't mean to interrupt, I just need some cherry juice from the fridge."

Ranma looked up. *Huh. Everyone calls her that, not just Yui.* She gestured to Izumi with an open palm, but her questioning eyes faced Hana. "I'm sorry, am I supposed to..."

She trailed off, but the elder woman understood what she meant, and shook her head. "No, honey. These girls have been with me for years, and I suppose we've become something of a little family now. Of course you don't have to say that if you don't want to. That said, if you ever feel like you want to, you're more than welcome to."

Mei, pushing through the saloon door with an armload of tequila bottles, giggled playfully. "Aww, I've always wanted a **little sister.**"

Yui rolled her eyes and held the door for her. "You **are** the little sister, blockhead!"

Ranma smiled, returning her focus to her task. As she worked, she wondered if Akane, Nabiki and Kasumi had ever been like this, before their mother had died. She hoped so. It was nice.

Ranma leaned over the round table, wiping the drink condensation from its lacquered cherry top with a towel and gathering the empty glasses from another table that had just been vacated. Izumi had to leave early to pick up her son from school with a mild fever, so Ranma had taken over waiting tables for her. It was tiring work, but Ranma was grateful for it. Anything to be putting some money in her pocket again. She didn't know how long she'd be allowed to stay in the little apartment above the bar, or where she would want to go instead, but she'd gotten a break from the street, a few decent meals and some friendly conversations, and all of that was worth enjoying for however long it lasted.

The bar's sound system was cranked nearly to maximum that night to cater to a college crowd, and Ranma was glad for it. Basically no one could hear themselves think, but the high-energy pop tracks put a bit of a bounce in her step when all she wanted to do was get off of her feet. She even caught herself singing along with the music from time to time, her voice being drowned out by the speakers.

Ranma tossed the empty glasses into the dishwasher, reaching down for the large green button to start it. The bar was running low on clean glassware and that had the potential to bring drink service to a halt. When she opened the cabinet for dish soap, she found that the container was empty, so she headed to the back for another one. She pushed through the swinging blue door into the back room, continuing to carry the tune she'd started singing along with in the main bar as she searched for a new bottle of detergent in the supply cabinet. Finding the last one at the very back of the cabinet, she closed the door to find Mei standing behind it. She was leaning on the wall, smiling broadly.

Ranma looked up, puzzled. *What is this girl's deal?*

"Wow, Ranko. You're really good. Like, **really** good!" Mei clapped her hands quietly, grinning down at the redhead.

Ranma blushed furiously. She was so lost in what she was doing that she'd forgotten that there weren't any speakers in the back room and her singing had been audible. It wasn't the first time she'd had that particular compliment, though. Akane had always said she had a good singing voice. Ranma smiled softly as she recalled getting badgered to take female form and sing with her and her sisters at the previous year's Tendo family Christmas party. Ranma wasn't sure she shared Akane's high opinion, but Soun seemed to really like it when the girls sang, and Akane really liked anything that made her dad proud, so Ranma had suffered through it and obliged for her sake. She might not have even minded so much, had Akane not insisted on dressing her up in that *absurdly* short red velvet dress like she was Santa's cutest elf. She'd even put *ribbons* in Ranma's hair, making her feel entirely ridiculous.

Mei smiled a bit disarmingly, playing with the end of one of her pigtails. "Don't be shy! It's okay! **Honest!**"

Being called **shy** only worsened the embarrassment for Ranma, though. Shy was a thing **girls** did, after all. "Seriously, it's not all that great! I just didn't think anyone could hear me. Sorry!"

Mei shook her head dismissively, still smiling brightly at the younger girl. “You don’t need to apologize! I’m just glad to see you’re having fun.”

Ranma’s face discovered a previously unknown shade of red. She was waiting tables, in an orange floral skater dress, singing, and... **having fun?** She wanted to talk herself out of it, but she honestly couldn’t. She finally gave in and smiled, nodding slightly. “Yeah, I guess I am!”

Waving goodbye to Mei, Ranma returned to the front of the house with the container of dish soap in hand. Mei headed to the prep counter, where she resumed peeling potatoes for french fries. The redheaded girl poured the detergent into the dishwasher and pressed the **start** button, looking up from her task just as a new patron entered the bar. She was probably in her early-to-mid-thirties, with jet black hair pulled back in a tight ponytail, and wearing a lime-green business suit consisting of a pencil skirt and a blazer over a cream-colored satin blouse. Her eyes scanned the bar behind her horn-rimmed glasses as if she were expecting to meet someone there. She definitely wasn’t dressed for a nightclub, though. Hana saw her as well, walking over to the woman and starting a conversation.

Ranma watched the two women curiously. *Maybe she’s Hana’s lawyer, or landlord, or something?*

Yui finished shaking a cocktail mixture vigorously over her right shoulder, pouring it into two Collins glasses and handing them to a young couple that was way overdressed for a dive bar. That done, she rounded the bar counter and made her way into the seating area. “Good evening, Mrs. Jirito. Welcome.” Yui bowed formally.

The woman in the green suit looked Yui over in exaggerated contemplation before bursting out into laughter. “Oh, get over yourself. Get your scrawny ass over here, girl!” She reached out and grabbed Yui around the neck, pulling her into a hug. When she let go, she turned and hugged Hana as well.

Ranma watched from behind the bar, trying not to stare, but it was only a moment more before Hana turned to Ranma and motioned her to join them. Mei handed Ranma a cocktail to deliver, and she hustled over to the three women, expecting to seat the newcomer at a nearby table.

Hana motioned to the redhead with the neck of her open beer bottle. “Ranko, I’d like you to meet Ayako. She’s the eldest of the girls here. Or, she *was*, anyway, before some fancy CEO asked her to marry him, and now she can’t be bothered to come around and visit her family anymore.”

Ayako waved her adoptive mother off, laughing loudly. There was the faintest hint of a snort in her laugh. “Hey now, Kage is just a director, not the CEO. And I **do** come around, when I can. We just don’t get into the city much these days.”

“Keeping busy at home, huh?” The bar’s owner smirked at her eldest daughter. “Working on making me some grandbabies, are we?”

“Mama!” Ayako blushed deeply, hiding her face behind her hands. “You’re so **bad!**”

Hana shook her head, smiling. “Anyway, Ayako, this is Ranko. It’s her second night working with us.”

Ranma handed the woman her margarita and bowed respectfully. "Pleasure to meet you, Mrs. Jirito."

"Ayako, please." Ayako rolled her eyes gently at Hana. "You still doing your *thing*, Mama?"

The elder woman nodded. "Hey, it worked out pretty well for you, didn't it?"

Ayako shrugged her shoulders with a wry smile. "I guess I can't complain." She turned to Ranma. "I hope my sisters aren't giving you too much of a hard time, Ranko?"

Ranma shook her head. "No, ma'am. They've done nothing but make me feel welcome."

"Quit with the *ma'am* shit, wouldja? It's just **Ayako!**" The raven-haired woman smiled. "But I'm glad to hear it. It seems I taught the girls something after all. What do you think of it all? Mama got you staying upstairs?"

Ranma nodded as she shrugged. "Everything's still pretty new to me, but so far, it's been great. I'm so grateful for the opportunity to learn and help out." She directed her second sentence more to Hana than Ayako.

"She's a really good kid, Aya. Even when she lies about her age." Hana flashed Ranma a knowing smirk and a bit of a side eye.

Ranma gulped hard, her eyes darting around in panic. "You... caught that?"

Hana nodded sagely. "You think you're the first person to try and age themselves up to get into a bar? You didn't invent it, honey. But I understand why you did. Think I could get the truth now, though?"

Ranma frowned, bowing in shame. "*Seventeen*. Eighteen on Saturday. I am so, **so sorry**, Hana. I didn't have a choice. I panicked."

The bar's owner placed her hand on Ranma's shoulder comfortingly. "Sweetheart, it's okay. I *forgive* you. Most people would do a hell of a lot worse than lie about their birthday to get off the street or put some money in an empty pocket. Technically, you're not supposed to be working after ten at night until you're eighteen though, so let's just pretend I didn't hear that for the next couple of days, okay?"

Ranma nodded with a sigh of relief. Her voice was subdued, and she looked down at her hands in shame. "Yes, *ma'am*."

Ayako shook her head, grinning at Hana with an exaggerated roll of her eyes. "Kids these days, am I right?"

Ranma walked quietly from the table to check on her other guests, still feeling fairly ashamed of herself. She tried to put on a smile as she interacted with the revelers, but her mind raced with worry and embarrassment.

"Oh, come on now, Ayako. Don't act like I didn't find you running from the police after stealing from an anime shop when you were her age." Hana smirked, gently nudging her daughter's padded shoulder with her left fist.

Ayako blushed. “That was a **lifetime** ago, Mama. I’m not anywhere **near** the same person anymore.”

Hana nodded sagely. “One day, it will be a lifetime ago for **her**, too. The point is to make sure she makes it there.”

“Same old Mama,” the younger woman said with a chuckle, saluting her mother with a tilt of her cocktail. “All these years, and **still** taking in strays.”

The old barkeep looked across the bar at Mei and Yui, both smiling and laughing with the customers as they shook cocktails over their heads in their steel mixing glasses. “And all four of you are alive because of it.” She turned her head slightly to Ranma, who was off in the corner clearing empty glasses from the edge of the pool table. It was clear from her slumping and slowed movement that all the joy she’d felt a few moments before had been replaced by her shame at having been caught lying. To Hana, all that did was prove that she was, just as she expected, a good kid who had done a desperate thing. “Maybe all **five**, now.”

Ayako raised her glass. “To the fifth wayward sister, then.”

Hana smiled proudly, clinking her beer bottle against Akayo’s margarita before turning to gaze across the bar room at her charges again. “To **all five** of them.”

“Ranma, help!” The pleading voice echoed through the cavernous arena.

Ranma grimaced. **“I’m coming, Akane!”** She thrust her left leg forward, sliding on the thin blade on her foot. *Socks on an oiled wood floor. Socks on an oiled wood floor,* she repeated in her mind, coaxing her body to find a muscle memory to apply to the unfamiliar motion required to ice skate. Begging her unsteady legs for speed, she fixed her eyes on the tall man in the white suit. She tried to ignore the roaring crowd warning him of her approach.

Closing the hundred or so meter gap, she leapt high into the air, the blade extruding from her left foot shining in the arena lights as she aimed for the back of Mikado’s head. **“Get OFF A HER!”** Her target turned at the sound of Ranma’s voice, releasing his grip on Akane’s left wrist.

Gotcha now, asshole! Wait... oh, shit... shitshitshitSHIT...

As Akane skated a few meters away to safety, she watched as the feminine form of her fiancé sailed high over the skater’s head, crashing to the ice in a tangle of arms and legs with a loud *smack* and a clatter of skate blades against the frozen surface. Akane winced, clearly regretting the limited time she’d had to give Ranma ice skating lessons before the challenge against the Golden Pair. In truth, neither of them were normally skaters, but due to a spate of sudden injuries on the Furinkan High martial arts figure skating team, Akane had been asked to substitute in for the pivotal match. Having no other friends with *both* martial arts and ice skating experience to ask, Akane had reached out to the best martial artist she knew to be her partner for the pairs competition. **“Ranma! Get up! He’s coming!”** She turned her attention to the oncoming assault from Mikado’s partner, Azusa Shiratori, trusting Ranma to hold her own.

Ranma scrambled to find her footing, but her hands and skates would not find purchase on the ice. In seconds, Mikado Sanzenin was on her. He dropped to his knees, knocking her flat with his shoulder and pinning the redhead on her back on the ice. He laughed with a ravenous glare, having no trouble whatsoever restraining his prey. Ranma’s body began to go numb as the chill from the rink ice sliced through the thin layer of kelly green silk that comprised her skating leotard. His hands were *everywhere*, making their way up her powerless form and pinning her arms to the ice at the wrists. Her eyes were locked on him, but in her peripheral vision, she could make out the crowd in the packed arena pointing and cackling viciously at her plight. **“YEAH! GET HER, MIKADO!”** came a chorus of mostly male voices from the crowd.

“Get off of me!”

Ranma’s assailant just laughed. He leaned down over her frame, puckering his lips. Ranma squirmed frantically, but it was no use. Between his grip and the frictionless ice surface, she had no leverage to escape. With a desperate scream that sounded far more like Akane’s feminine cry for help than any battle *kiai* she’d ever uttered, Ranma managed to wrest her right arm free and swung wildly for his face, closing her eyes tightly and turning her face away from his as she did so.

Mercifully, she felt her punch solidly connect. A split second later, the resonant *crash* of the lamp from her nightstand against the steel refrigerator door startled her. She sat up bolt-straight in bed, finding both the yellow tee shirt she'd taken to using as a nightshirt and the lavender sheets beneath soaked with sweat. Her chest heaved as if she'd just run a marathon. Ranma looked around the still-unfamiliar room, taking a moment to remember where exactly she was and how she got there.

"Holy shit. Just a dream."

She swiveled on her backside, pulling her legs out from under the purple duvet cover and dangling them off the bed. With a long, slow exhale, she brushed her loose hair from her face with her fingers. She'd been having the dream, or some variation of it, periodically ever since her and Akane's battles with the Golden Pair, but far more often since "it" had happened.

Stupid macho move. I should've done the skating thing with Akane as a guy. Yeah, it's super girly, but at least then he wouldn't have...

She slid off of the mattress onto her bare feet and strode the two meters or so separating her bed from what constituted the apartment's attempt at a kitchen. Grateful that it hadn't broken, Ranma collected the lamp from the kitchen floor and returned it to the nightstand before slumping into one of the small wooden chairs surrounding her compact little dining table. Still in the haze between asleep and awake, her mind drifted back into her memories – thankfully, not of the day she first fought Mikado, but of the days that followed.

When it first happened, Ranma hadn't really been sure how to feel about it. He knew he felt disgusted, and he felt an overwhelming urge to solve his dilemma like every other social problem he had – with his fists. He and Akane had already challenged Mikado and Azusa to another duel, but he could care less about Mikado's psychotic partner. Mikado, though? That jerk was going to *pay*.

The feelings of anger and vengeance felt normal to Ranma, as indeed they were to someone with his long history of resolving every emotional conflict with physical conflict, but there was something else – a *vulnerability* that he'd never really experienced before. He wasn't sure how to articulate it, but it felt as if something more than pride had been taken from him. He'd been defeated in a fight before, and it was no big deal; he'd go spend a few days training, pick up some new technique or analyze his opponent's moves, and he'd crush them in a face-saving rematch. But what had happened in that skating rink wasn't a beating so much as it was a *violation*, and it would not be undone whether he sent Mikado to the hospital or not.

He desperately needed to talk to someone. In his mind, guys weren't wired to process stuff like the feelings that coursed through his mind. But who? First, he thought of Akane. She was there, so she would understand. At least he wouldn't have to say it out loud: *A guy held me down and kissed me. Grabbed at me. Tried to grab my...* Problem was, Akane was probably used to feeling the way Ranma did. Half the guys in her class had black eyes in their school identification card photos because they'd tried to push themselves on her. She would probably think what he was going through was no big deal at all.

Nabiki? No chance. She never met a weakness she couldn't exploit. She had her sweet moments, but even those were usually employed in service of some scheme she was running. Going to her would just be feeding her blackmail material to use against Ranma

later. Kasumi? Ranma had no doubt she would be understanding, but something felt wrong about talking to her about this sort of thing, as if it would corrupt her somehow.

That brought his thoughts back to Akane. He made it to the door of her room before pausing, stopping his hand before it reached the doorknob just below the white duck bearing her name. *I can't do this*, he thought to himself. *I can't show her that something like this is bothering me. Guys aren't supposed to feel weak and vulnerable like this. She'll never look at me the same. Just shake it off. That's what Pop would say. Except... I'm trying to shake it off, and... I just can't.*

He went back down the stairs, defeated. He guessed, as a last resort, he could *try* talking to his father. Walking through the dining room, he paused, detouring into the kitchen and making for the sink. Somehow, Ranma felt that the conversation would be easier if he were wearing a different skin.

A moment later, her hair and red tang shirt still dripping with cold water, she joined Genma in sitting on the grass out by the koi pond. "Hey, Pop, can I... *talk to you* about something? It's... kind of weird, fair warning."

Genma looked at her, a little confused, before taking a thick black marker from some hidden fold of his panda fur and writing, *Sure thing, Ranma, what's up?* on a small cardboard placard he held up for her to read.

She shook her head, rolling her eyes and holding up a brass tea kettle. "Ideally, where you can talk back."

The panda nodded, and with a quick pour from the spout, her father sat before her again. "Okay. Now, you were saying?" Ranma averted her eyes for a moment as the nude middle-aged man darted behind the bushes to retrieve his ivory gi and don it.

"*Okay, so... this is...*" She trailed off as he returned, looking down at her hands. The thought of making eye contact with her father and letting him see the shame she carried in her soul grossed her out even more than seeing his bare ass. "You remember a couple days ago, when Akane and I did that skating thing?"

He nodded. "Ah! You wanted me to train you up so you don't get your butt kicked again when you rematch him? Don't worry, my boy, I'm sure we can scare up some Saotome School of Anything Goes Martial Arts technique for **exactly** this situation! No problem!" He clapped her hard on the shoulder with his hand.

Ranma tensed, shuddering and quickly brushing his hand off of her body. *Please don't touch me. When people touch me, all I can feel is...* "No, Pop, not that. So, I was really pissed when we got home, and you and Mr. Tendo thought it was because we lost. I mean, I guess that was part of it, but not **all** of it." Genma nodded, listening intently.

Ranma gulped. There was no unsaying it once it was said. She fidgeted with her fingers in her lap. "Well, ya see, the thing is, the guy we fought, Mikado? He was chasing Akane all over the ice, and I figured I had to help her, right? So I got between them. I wasn't super great on the skates though, and he managed to knock me down and... **grapple** me."

Genma shrugged nonchalantly. "So? That happens all the time in combat. I've shown you this a thousand times, boy. You just use an aikido throw, and..."

"No, Pop!" Ranma interrupted. She could not bear one more word of him telling her all the ways she could have prevented what happened to her; she'd already done nothing but come up with her own list for days as the scene replayed in her mind. "You don't **get it!** I was a **girl**, and he held me down and... *and he... he kissed me.*"

Genma stared at her intently for a moment, saying nothing until he could hold it no longer. And then he began to laugh. It was a merry, full laugh, as if he had just pulled off an amazing prank. He threw his head back, holding his belly with both of his hands.

*Is that all I am to you? Just a... **joke**?* Ranma glared up at the pudgy old man. *I fucking knew coming to you was a mistake.*

"That's what this is all about? Ranma, this is **fantastic!** If he's infatuated with your girl form, you can use that to your advantage in a future match! Wear something even *cuter* and distract him until you can strike! Besides, you're not **really** a girl anyway, so why do you care?"

Ranma nodded in hollow acknowledgement of his words, willing the tear tracing a path down her cheek to blend in with her dripping hair. *"Yeah, I guess you're right, Pop. Thanks."* She stood, turned her back and walked away. She should have known better. He'd never understand why it was tearing her up inside that Mikado had humiliated and violated her like that in front of thousands of people who just sat there and... **cheered him** for it. In front of their friends. In front of their schoolmates. In front of Akane. Damn it, **in front of Akane!**

Ranma didn't think she'd ever get Genma to comprehend that it wasn't just the fact that Mikado had kissed her, as if that wasn't enough. It was the mind-shattering realization that if she could lose a fight and be held powerless to stop a kiss, what *else* might she be unable to prevent? Any martial artist who managed to beat her in a fight could do... *whatever he wanted* to her. In that moment, she was more afraid than she had ever been in her life. She was not remotely prepared for the realization that the kinds of things that could happen to *normal girls* could also happen to **her**.

Is this how regular girls feel every day? This constant dread that the next guy to come around the corner could just decide to do... anything... to you, and unless you manage to be quicker or stronger, you're just defenseless? No wonder every girl Ranma knew seemed to be pissed off all the time by default at every guy they encountered.

From then on, Ranma had never said another word to anyone about what happened on the ice that day, not even after he'd taken his vengeance on Mikado Sanzenin. Everybody in the house either thought Ranma was a pervert, thought his feminine half was a mask that meant nothing to anyone, or was just too oblivious to even notice anything was wrong. No one would listen. They *never* listened, not that they had any hope to understand if they did. The best he could hope for was that no one heard him stir when the nightmares came. That was also when Ranma started dedicating time during his training regimen each week to practice fighting in his female form. Ranma was determined to learn how to weaponize his feminine body the way he had the masculine, maximizing every advantage he could find. As a guy, Ranma had to be strong and fast, but as a girl? He had to become **invincible**, or he didn't think he'd ever sleep right again.

Of course, not a month later, after Ranma had gone to his father for help and been laughed at, what did Genma do? Apologize? Give her some advice? No! He and Mr. Tendo moved the grandmaster of all lechers into the guest room next to the kitchen. Happosai, the ancient

progenitor of Anything-Goes Martial Arts, was as perverted and handsy as he was utterly *unbeatable* in a fight. Ranma had spent weeks trying to come to grips with the idea that any random martial artist who managed to beat her might try to take advantage of her, and now the guy who *taught* the guy who taught Ranma everything he knew about fighting was the biggest and most constant threat. Now every second, even when Ranma was a guy, even in his own home, he was a glass of water away from being groped at and molested while his father and future father-in-law watched and did nothing.

He never understood that about Soun in particular. Ranma had recently been brought to the painful understanding that taking female form afforded him none of the social courtesies afforded women as far as the men of the house were concerned. But even if he didn't think Ranma's own modesty and dignity mattered, how could Soun just sit there and drink his tea and watch some old pervert get all handsy with his daughters? Where did he get off saying Ranma had to protect Akane, when he himself wouldn't even *try*?

And then, of course, "it" happened. After she returned home from the ski resort, no Phoenix Pill in hand, the only time Ranma wanted to leave the guest room on the second floor was when her father was in it. Akane and her sisters did everything they could for her. Even their dads tried to give her a little space to come to terms with it at first. But when Soun first told Happosai... Ranma would *never* forget the look on his face. It was like Christmas had come early for him. He did not care in the slightest that Ranma was a *human being*, feeling more vulnerable than she ever knew possible, because to him, she was nothing but a shiny new toy he couldn't wait to play with.

Kasumi had tried to help. Her heart was in the right place. If Ranma would never be a guy again, Kasumi was determined to teach her how to function as a girl, just as she'd done for her younger sisters after their mother had died when Akane was just five years old. She was constantly bringing home skirts and dresses to try and force the household's new ingénue into, coaching her on mannerisms, things like that. She had even offered *bridal training* once! But not only did her coaxing constantly remind Ranma of the hopeless permanence of her situation, it was like pouring jet fuel on Happosai's perversion toward her. From that moment until Ranma finally ran from the Tendo residence to take her chances alone on the streets of Tokyo, rare was the day that he hadn't...

Ranma sighed, willing her attention to the present. She rubbed her temples, trying to push the intrusive memories out of her mind. *Nothing good ever comes out of it when I start thinking about all that stuff.* She yawned, wishing yet again that she could still tolerate hot tea and that she had some groceries in her little apartment to try and cobble together a quick bite. *I'll have to work on that when I build up a little money. Might as well get dressed and head down to work,* she mused to herself, heading for her closet. *Hana said I could help myself to anything in the kitchen.*

Under the circumstances, she wasn't really feeling like she could handle the exposure of a skirt at the moment, but she still felt obligated to use something she had been offered so she didn't seem ungrateful. She decided to compromise, picking a yellow blouse dotted with little white sunflowers and pairing it with her black gi pants. When she pulled Izumi's satin top over her head, her whole body shivered as it softly slid over her hypersensitive skin. Her breath caught in her throat, and she could have sworn her heart stopped just for half a moment. She had to admit, while it was terrible having the Full Body Cat's Tongue constantly amplifying every bad sensation on her skin, it didn't always suck that it powered up the good ones, too.

At that moment, a thought struck her, and a brand-new dread began clanging in her head like iron bells. What if something like Mikado's assault or Happosai's constant groping happened again, and not only was she unable to fight her way out of it, but it reached a point that it physically felt *too good to stop*? What if her body's involuntary response, cranked up to seventeen on a scale of one to ten, paralyzed her when she needed to fight back? What if it felt so physically overwhelming that she couldn't *will herself to resist*?

Suddenly, Ranma had lost all interest in breakfast.

“*Morning*, Ranko!” Mei waved cheerfully, not expecting a wave in response as Ranma’s hands were currently full of knife and potato.

Ranma swallowed hard, and Mei could tell her mind was somewhere else. *Ranko. Even my name is a lie*, Ranma thought to herself. *I can’t let them find out. I can’t undo the fact I lied to them, and I didn’t know it at the time, but I think I can trust them, and they deserved the truth.* Hana and Yui called out their good mornings as well as Mei entered the kitchen and set about her daily tasks.

“Aw, *crap!*” Mei stuck her head out from the walk-in cooler. “We’re out of orange juice.” She frowned in slight embarrassment; she should have noticed that they were running low during the previous day’s setup, but she had been distracted by the new hire’s continued training.

Hana pulled up the sleeve of her ever-present black leather jacket and looked at her watch. “Well, we’re just about ready, with plenty of time to spare. Wanna run up to the corner store and pick up a little bit to get us through until the next delivery? Grab some cash out of the till.”

Ranma, having finished setting up the prep area, looked around for something else to do. Everything had gone so much faster than the day before with the benefit of experience and an early start, and all the tasks she’d been trained to handle were already finished. Mei tapped her on the shoulder. “Hey, Ranko, feel like a walk? You’ve been stuck here nonstop for days. We don’t want you thinking you’re just another piece of kitchen equipment.”

Ranma shrugged. She honestly was quite fine to stay inside; after the previous two months of her life, she was grateful to be anywhere that she could feel like she belonged and was safe. “Sure, I guess.” Following the blue-haired girl, Ranma exited through the steel back door in the kitchen, passing the dumpster in the alley and starting down a side street. She was grateful that the route didn’t seem to pass the dojo where she’d suffered her humiliating defeat a few short days before. At least the bruise on her face was almost gone, but she’d not yet re-braided her hair to keep the yellowing splotch around her right eye hidden.

“So, what do you think of everything so far? Settling in okay?” Mei nudged her companion gently on the arm as they walked. “Any questions or anything?”

Ranma blushed a bit, and it made the sore spot on her right cheek ache slightly. “Honestly, I don’t know *what* to think. All of you have been so nice to me, and I’m not sure I’m worth all this attention.”

Mei shook her head. “Of course you are, and anyone that told you otherwise is clearly lying.”

Ranma wasn’t really sure how to respond, so she didn’t, and Mei continued. “Look, I know it’s hard. When you’ve always been on your own, sometimes it’s hard to take kindness at face value. When I first got here... gods, I don’t know how Mama put up with me. I was rude and angry all the time. All I could think about was getting the next fix. I was so used to being let down by everyone that I couldn’t imagine somebody genuinely caring about me. Assuming they didn’t was easier; if people didn’t care about me, then it didn’t matter if I hurt

them to get what I needed. I don't know what they saw in me, honestly. Even I was pretty sure I was beyond saving."

Ranma nodded in sympathy. "You seem to be doing okay now though."

Mei blushed a little. "Yeah, I guess I am. It's still hard sometimes. For me, I always wanted to use most when I was depressed, so the best way to keep from being tempted is to try to be happy all the time, even when I have to fake it to get through the rough parts. Some days, that's easier than others. But I remember that even when I didn't deserve it, Mama and the other girls didn't give up on me, and I can't let them down now by giving up on myself."

Ranma bobbed her head softly in contemplative acknowledgement as she pulled open the door to the little neighborhood grocery and held it for her companion.

Mei picked up a blue plastic hand-held shopping basket, heading for the coolers in the back. Ranma followed, shivering a bit as they entered the refrigerated section. Grateful though she was for at least being in pants and not a skirt, extreme temperatures were still something of a problem for her. After dropping three plastic jugs of the milky orange liquid into the basket, Mei turned to Ranma. "Can we think of anything else we need?"

Ranma shrugged, her eyes scanning the shelves. "Don't look at me! I'm still learning all of this stuff."

With a playful shake of her head, Mei walked back toward the produce section and picked up a few whole oranges. "We'll use these for the garnish part, and in the worst case scenario we can throw them in the juicer if we have to." Ranma walked past a display of pineapples, and couldn't help but think about all of the times that the sight of the fruit meant the sadistic Principal Kuno was up to something. It felt like a lifetime ago. *Gonna have to get used to that; they use them all the time in that Dragonfire thing.*

Dropping a few bills on the counter, Mei waved to the shopkeeper as she pocketed the remainder of the money she'd taken from the Phoenix's cash register. She headed to the door, her new redheaded friend not far behind. The little bell on the door jangled again when the person in line behind her, a squat man in a dark blue hooded sweatshirt, finished his own transaction and left the store as well.

Mei led Ranma on a different route back, behind the row of businesses, so they'd have a view of the harbor beyond. It was pretty; the mid-afternoon is normally when the fishing boats would come back and share some of their catch with the waiting pelicans, and it created a flurry of feathery activity. "So, what kinds of stuff do you like to do?"

Ranma shrugged. Pretty much all of her time had been spent in training for one fight or another, or bailing Akane out of some mess at school. The girls' athletic teams at Furinkan High really needed a better strength coach or something, because their star players always seemed to get injured right before a pivotal match. Then again, when all of your school's sports have to do with martial arts, that might not be as crazy as she thought. "Haven't really thought about it much. Survivin's been activity enough for me."

Mei groaned. "Don't worry, we'll find you something."

"Well, then what about you?" Ranma countered.

“Oh, ya know. I’m big into movies, video games, stuff like that. I’ve had all the high scores on that Pac-Man machine at the bar for something like six months.” She continued on, rambling about some American movie where four guys shot lasers at ghosts or something, but Ranma had begun to tune out a little. Something wasn’t right, and she couldn’t quite put her finger on what it was.

They turned a corner, cutting between two of the taller buildings to get back onto the main road where the bar was situated. Ranma’s eyes darted around. *Footsteps. I’m sure of it this time. We’re not alone.*

“Earth to Ranko! Hey, you okay?” Mei tugged on her arm, as she had clearly drifted out of the conversation.

Ranma had just begun to stammer out an apology for having spaced out on her, when a male voice came from the entrance to the alley in the direction they were headed. “Hey, girls! What brings you out here?” A second, and then a third, man entered the alley behind them, and Ranma recognized one of them as the guy who had been in line behind them at the store.

“Yeah, I thought you were too good to hang out with us!” The man in front of Mei sneered, and she backed away from him. Mei looked genuinely afraid, her eyes searching for an escape as the men closed in on them from both sides of the narrow alley.

Ranma whispered to her, keeping within arm’s reach of her friend. *“You know these guys?”*

Mei nodded sharply. “We’ve had to throw them out of the bar **more** than a few times.”

The man in front of them, a large brute in a gray hoodie, cracked his knuckles, drawing closer. “So, Mei, how about that **kiss** now?”

Oh. So they’re those kinds of guys, Ranma realized. *This is gonna be fun.*

“Please, just leave us alone!” Mei pleaded, waving her hands defensively in front of herself.

The two men approaching them from behind continued their advance. Ranma’s eyes scoured the alley, searching for any advantage she could find. She spotted something behind a nearby dumpster, and handed Mei the paper bag of fruit. *“Hang onto this for me a sec.”*

Mei watched in terror as Ranma strode a few meters away, to a little corner of the alley behind a brick building. She leaned with one hand on the lid of a nearby blue dumpster and reached down to the ground, picking up an old broom that someone from the apartments upstairs must have discarded.

“Look, guys, we’ve got somewhere to be, okay?” Ranma closed the distance between herself and Mei, broom in hand.

The man in the blue hoodie snickered. “Oh, Mei, you brought us **another** girl so we didn’t all have to **share**. That was **sweet** of you.”

Okay, Ranma thought. *Now, it’s on.* Stepping on the head of the broom, she twisted a few times until the plastic collar holding the bristles dropped to the asphalt. “Yo, Mei? You might

wanna go hang out over there by that fire escape for a minute.”

Mei shook her head. “No! We gotta stay together!” Hana had entrusted her with their new ward, and while she knew she had no means to protect the younger girl, Mei felt an obligation to try.

“*Nah*, go relax.” Ranma gave her a confident smirk and a small but forceful shove, soliciting a little yelp from the blue-haired woman. Mei stumbled forward and turned just in time to see the broken little girl they’d taken in just two days before transform before her eyes somehow into something fierce and unyielding.

“It’s about to get a little messy.”

The lithe redhead lifted the broom handle over her head, whirling it artfully around her body before locking it into her hands in a ninjutsu forward ready stance. The **whoosh** noises her makeshift bo staff made as it sliced through the air echoed between the tall buildings. “Well, **come on** then!” she taunted, her eyes moving between the three challengers.

The men cackled dismissively, miming a shudder of fear. “*Oooh*, she must be a **cheerleader**. Look at how pretty she can twirl a **stick!**” a wiry punk in a gray shirt jeered before charging at Ranma in a dead run.

As if, Ranma thought with a sneer as she locked her wrists to fortify her grip on her weapon. *Don’t get too close*, she thought. *Don’t get hit. Only gonna get one shot at this.* As soon as her first assailant got within range of the broomstick, Ranma advanced. She bent low, whirling the wooden stick over her back to gain momentum before targeting the man’s knees. The strike cost him his balance and dropped him onto his back. Before she could follow up her strike, the man from the front of the alley lunged at her from behind. She jabbed the stick straight backward, striking his ribs and pushing him back. It was imperative that she kept them at a distance; she knew her weapon would do her no good in close quarters. She had to keep them out of reach - if she started taking hits with the Full-Body Cat’s Tongue in play, the fight would end both quickly and unfavorably.

Mei huddled behind a pile of discarded blue plastic soda pallets as she watched the battle unfold. Ranma ran at the most distant of her opponents, jabbing her stick into the ground hard enough to send the loose gravel of the alley flying around her ankles. She winced with the sting of the pebbles striking her ankle through her black gi pants, but continued on, carrying her forward momentum through the pole vault maneuver. She propelled herself toward her adversary, landing a kick with her left foot to his face. As soon as her feet touched the ground, she spun on the loose gravel with a quiet **crunch** and delivered a followup sweep kick to the downed attacker’s jaw with her right foot.

The first man - the one she’d tripped - closed from behind her, so Ranma sprung back to her feet and backward to buy another meter or so of space. As she descended, she whirled her staff around her body and forward, slashing at his cheek. He shrugged off the glancing blow and charged her with a loud roar. She dropped to her back, crying out loudly as her torso crashed to the sharp gravel. Holding her staff perpendicular to her body and locking her elbows, she planted her left foot square in the man’s chest, using his momentum to launch him over the staff and behind her with a well-timed throw. The gravel of the alley felt like sandpaper against her skin even through the fabric of her blouse.

As she rose to her feet, the first combatant she’d kicked crashed into her from behind,

grabbing a handful of her loose flame-red hair and yanking her backward. Ranma shrieked as her scalp burned like it was being torn from her skull, and she drove her right elbow backward into her assailant's sternum. As he gasped and released his grip, she pivoted her fist up, her elbow still pressing between his pectorals as she struck his already-swollen eye socket with the back of her fist. She then hinged her forearm downward at the elbow, delivering a second fist - this one directly to the blond thug's crotch.

While Ranma had been fighting off two of the men, the third had advanced on Mei behind her. He approached Mei's hiding place, calling out to her in a menacingly sing-song voice. "*Come out, come out...*" He burst around the corner, and Mei screeched, holding up her brown paper shopping bag to her face in some last-ditch attempt at a defense.

Ranma whirled as her most recent target crumpled. *Damn*, she thought. *Missed one*. "Hey, **jerk!** Pick on somebody your own size! **Hyaah!**"

The leering assailant turned to face the sound just in time to make contact with the threaded end of Ranma's broomstick, which she had hurled like a javelin from some seven meters away. She ran after it, both of her first two attackers disabled for the moment. From the sickening *crunch* it made on impact, Ranma knew his nose was almost certainly broken. The attacker collapsed on his back in a heap. The rattle of wood on concrete echoed through the alley as the stick hit the wall, but Ranma popped it up with her toe and caught it with a flourish.

"To hell with **this**, man!" The two men she'd previously dispatched had finally helped each other to their feet, and they had apparently had enough of their misadventure. They turned and ran back the way they came down the alley.

The ringleader lay on his back, his hands looking for purchase on the wall to help himself up. Mei cowered a few meters away. Ranma rushed forward and snapped at the thug's wrist with her stick, disengaging it from the wall. She took a step forward, ice and fire in her eyes, and placed her right foot on the brute's throat. She pushed her leg forward ever so slightly, allowing him to breathe but applying pressure to the bottom of his chin. "Now, I think you owe my friend an apology, don't you?"

He grabbed wildly at Ranma's ankle, but she drove the end of her makeshift staff forcefully downward into the back of his hand, pinning it to the asphalt. "*Nuh-uh-uh...* Stay down."

He knew he was beat. "**Okay!** Okay! I'm fuckin' **sorry**," he coughed, his voice soured by the change in airflow through his crushed nasal cavity and the pressure on his airway.

"*There*, that wasn't so hard, *was it?*" She lifted her foot from his neck, placing herself between the man and Mei before he could stand. "Get the hell **out of here**." He scrambled to his feet and took off running after his fellow delinquents, the first few steps taken on his hands and knees.

When all three had vanished from sight, Ranma tossed the stick aside and turned to Mei, looking her over for visible injury. She spoke softly, trying to calm the terrified girl's nerves. "Hey, it's cool. They're gone now, Mei. Are you okay?"

Mei shook her head in disbelief. "*How did you... just, how?*"

Ranma waved off the rest of her friend's sentence with a selfsure smirk. "Well, okay, maybe I

did have **some** hobbies growing up.” She put her arm around Mei’s back, shepherding her out of the corner. Her eyes searched the alley as they moved for any further danger, but spied none. *Gotta get her to the street. Less chance of getting jumped if people can see.*

“That was *in... credible*,” Mei stammered as they turned the corner onto the main road. “You’re *amazing*.”

The redhead waved her off. “Nah, those guys were nothin’.” Ranma took the bag from her friend and draped the handles over her left wrist, keeping her right arm around the shorter girl’s back supportively. “Come on, let’s get you back.” Ranma sighed to herself as they walked. She had really hoped not to introduce the martial arts element of her past to her benefactors - at least, not yet - but under the circumstances, there hadn’t really been a choice.

“*Thank you*,” Mei whispered.

Ranma shook her head. “**Please**. After everything you guys have done for me? Don’t even mention it.” With that, Ranma pulled the bar’s tinted glass front door open, holding it with her backside to allow Mei to enter.

“Oh my **gods**, what **happened?!?**” Yui rushed around the counter, immediately sensing from the way Ranma shepherded Mei through the front door into the bar room that something was wrong. Her exclamation drew the attention of Izumi behind the service bar, and before Ranma could take five steps into the room, Hana had appeared from behind the blue saloon door leading to the kitchen and her office as well.

“Some guys jumped us in the alley. I think she’s okay. Just a little shaken up,” Ranma said, walking with Mei to the split between the main and service bar counters and transferring her into the care of the bar’s matriarch. She set the shopping bags on the counter, unable to push past the cluster of women to reach the walk-in refrigerator in the kitchen area. *It’s just orange juice; it’ll keep fine for a few minutes out of the fridge*, she reasoned.

Hana, Yui and Izumi fretted over Mei behind the counter, checking her over, hugging her, and trying to calm her down. Ranma, however, wandered away to give the family space to look after their own. She tried not to watch them huddle around Mei, as it only served as a painful reminder to her that there was no one left to care if *she* had been hurt - not that anyone really ever had. The fact that Mei kept gesturing to her was making her nervous, too, though she couldn’t hear what her blue-haired coworker was saying. The redhead’s mind raced through what repercussions could come from letting the genie that was her former life out of its bottle around her benefactors and coworkers, even if only a little.

She walked sullenly to the back of the bar and dropped a coin in the dusty old Pac-Man machine behind the purple-felted pool table. Perhaps it would calm her racing mind. Sure enough, the top ten slots for high scores all bore the initials **MEI**. Ranma doubted she’d dislodge any of them, but what the hell - for once in her life, it was refreshing to do something without caring whether or not she won. The machine fired up with its little chime, and soon the **waka-waka-waka** noises began to drown out Ranma’s thoughts. It didn’t last long, though, because all three of her lives were lost in a matter of seconds.

The spring-loaded joystick rocked back when she released it with a loud *thwack* that seemed only to underscore her frustration. *Shouldn’t waste another fifty yen. Better hang onto my cash. They’re gonna toss me out on my ass any second, and that’ll almost be enough for a rice ball or something from the vending machines at the train station.* Over the last few months, she’d memorized the prices of nearly every regularly-restocked machine in the Minato and Shibuya districts - indeed, the primary reason she’d chosen the Minato train station as her home base while living homeless was its inexpensive array of vending machines. The relatively clean bathrooms, access to a few moderately comfortable - and mostly secluded - benches to sleep on in the park nearby, and a roof she could duck under at any time of night if it started raining hadn’t hurt, either. Sighing with regret for having spent the first coin so frivolously, Ranma turned away from the machine. When she looked up, she found Yui standing behind her, waiting for her game to end.

Yui smiled tentatively. “It’s a damned good thing you *fight* better than you eat ghosts, kiddo.”

Defensively, Ranma snapped back, recoiling until her backside bumped the joystick of the yellow-and-black arcade cabinet. “Look, I don’t know what she told you, but it’s no big deal. Some guys got a little sassy. I hit ‘em with a stick, and they took off. End of story.”

Hana slipped between the bar counters, emerging from behind Yui and rushing toward Ranma. With all of the adrenaline still coursing through her system, Ranma fought her every instinct to drop into a defensive stance as the leather-clad woman charged toward her with urgency in her eyes. *Welp, the jig is up now. They know I'm a fake. Better just go upstairs and get my shit. Fuck. It was fun while it lasted.*

Hana reached Ranma's position, wrapping her arms around the slender redhead's shoulders tightly. "Are you **alright**, Ranko? You're not **hurt**, are you? C'mere, honey. Let me see you." She remembered the teen's black eye from a few days before, concerned she might have sustained further injury.

Wait, Ranma thought, shocked by the turn of events. *She's not... huh? What the hell is even happening right now?*

Before Ranma could react, Hana extended her arms and locked her elbows, still holding her by the shoulders but at Hana's full arm length to create a bit of space between them. She began to look Ranma over, physically turning her body this way and that exactly as she had done with Mei. She brushed away some loose gravel that remained trapped in the wrinkles in the back of Ranma's yellow floral blouse, letting the gray dust and pebbles scatter on the freshly-mopped hardwood floor.

Satisfied that her young charge was undamaged, Hana pulled her into another forceful hug. Ranma's muscles tightened again, instinctively preparing to break free. Most of the hugs she had experienced in the last few years had involved people trying to grope her. Hana spoke gently, still holding her newest ward tightly to her chest.

"Thank you **so much** for looking out for Mei, Ranko."

Not even Ranma's own father had ever shown that much concern when she'd been in a fight. Of course, that might not have been because he didn't care, but because he knew how skilled she was in a fight and how unlikely she was to sustain real injury. *Well, before, anyway. Now...* Akane had sometimes fawned over her after a fight, but usually only when she thought Ranma might be beaten badly enough to actually be dead. Even then, it was only in the handful of cases where Akane hadn't been the one who'd pounded her half to death in the first place.

Okay... This isn't so bad. Feels... kinda nice, actually. The smell of oiled leather filled her nostrils from the proprietress' jacket. There was something about it - an inherent sense of *safety* that Ranma found entirely unfamiliar and unexplainable. Hana held the teenager close until she felt the tensed muscles of Ranma's body begin to relax.

At last, the young martial artist spoke tentatively. "So... *so I'm not in trouble, then?* You're not gonna, like, fire me, or throw me out, or nothin'?"

Hana scoffed incredulously. "Ranko, honey, **why** would you think you were in trouble? You protected yourself and Mei from *gods know what* out there. I'm so **proud** of you, and truth be told, pretty damn impressed. I've seen the guys you fought in here before, and the smallest of them is almost **twice** your size. I don't know how you did it, but I'm so thankful that you did, and that both of you girls are okay."

Ranma gulped slowly. She knew that fighting the trio of assailants had presented an injury risk given her condition, but she hadn't considered the *other* part of what Hana said.

Ranma's only instinct in the alley had been to protect Mei. Her adrenaline had kicked in, and her thoughts had reverted entirely to her base training: *Fight. Win.* Ranma hadn't even considered that whatever the three men had planned to do to Mei, they probably would have done to *her* as well if they'd gotten the chance. The fight had ended nearly an hour ago, and only now did she realize that the threat to herself had been far greater than the pain the Full-Body Cat's Tongue would have forced her to endure from a punch or a kick. She was just as *vulnerable* as any other girl, and just as likely to have guys thinking they had power over her. *Guys just like...*

"I..." Her mind scrambled for words, but there was too much confusion and far too many mental alarms blaring in her consciousness to focus her thoughts enough to find further words. She looked up, making eye contact with Hana for the first time since the fight, and exhaled slowly. Every instinct told her to fight. Protect herself. And yet, when she gazed into the old woman's brown eyes, searching for dishonestly, deception or dark intent, she found only... compassion. The care and concern in Hana's eyes somehow put her at ease. "I'm good, ma'am, honest." She managed a small smile, even though **honest** was the last thing she felt as it pertained to her benefactors.

Yui sighed, shaking her head. "I'm really sorry you had to deal with those guys. We don't get too much trouble around here, but the bar business does invite the occasional asshole, especially when the bar's run by all women."

Ranma shook her head dismissively. She flashed a confident smile. "It's really okay. I'm used to having to defend myself in a fight." She was surprised to see her self-assuredness met not with a smile, but a frown of concern, from the Phoenix's lead bartender.

"Ranko... you're not *supposed* to be used to this. *Nobody* should be." Yui searched her emotional reserves for a smile to show the frightened teen. "But, I guess we have a *bouncer* now, huh?"

Ranma shook her head. "Oh. Come on, I'm not *that* good. Seriously, those guys were pushovers." It was another lie, but the last thing she wanted was for martial arts to define her existence again, especially now that her fighting prowess had been severely handicapped by her unnaturally hypersensitive skin.

"Seriously, Ranko, where did you learn to fight like that? Taking on **three** guys at once? And at your age?" Izumi, having just finished putting away the groceries Ranma and Mei had procured, smiled downward into Ranma's eyes, a smile of pride crossing her face.

Ranma wondered whether she meant the false age she had given in her interview, or if Hana had told Izumi and the other women that she'd discerned the truth. "*I, ah...* well, my pop, he was big into martial arts. I guess I picked up a **few** things." Before the Cat's Tongue stole her ability to take even a single hit without crumpling in agony, she could have beaten her father into next week while half-asleep and drunk, but that minor detail didn't seem particularly useful at the time.

The blonde smirked, giving the younger girl a bit of an impressed nod. "Well, if you ask me, you're a **badass**, kiddo."

Ranma blushed, but cracked a small, nervous smile. "Okay, okay. Maybe a **little**. So you guys don't have to worry about me, 'kay? Just make sure Mei's good. She didn't get hit, but she was pretty freaked out."

Hana shushed her, turning the slight girl's frame physically with her hands until Ranma was looking directly at her. "Listen to me. You are **both** worth looking after, Ranko. It's not mutually exclusive. You deserve for people to care about **you**, too, sweetheart."

I... I do? Ranma blinked. *This is... weird. They're treating me like I'm one of...*

Yui grinned, giving the shorter girl a soft play-punch on her shoulder. "That's what family does, blockhead. Ya know?"

Ranma looked up incredulously, her eyes darting from one of the women to the next as she searched their faces for confirmation that they were playing some kind of sick joke on the poor homeless girl that had all but declared herself an orphan. She found none. "**F... family?!**" In her experience, the punching thing was far more of the family pastime than the hugging and the supportive words were.

It wasn't Yui's voice that answered, but Mei's. The blue-haired girl seemed to have collected herself. She was smiling softly as she leaned on the wall separating the kitchen from the gaming alcove in the back corner of the bar room, peering out between Yui and Izumi.

"You heard her, **little sister.**"

"G'night, girls!" Ranma waved until the door rattled shut as Mei and Izumi exited, leaving Yui and Ranma alone in the empty bar. It had been a long night, but a decent one. A few guys in nice suits had come in from some business event or other and spent entirely too much money on fried food and the bar's signature *Dragonfire* pineapple cocktails.

Yui popped open a bottle of draft beer with a bottle opener dangling from her belt, straddling a stool on the customer side of her bar counter and sitting down. She was wearing a bright yellow long-sleeved men's dress shirt, unbuttoned enough to show a white camisole underneath, and black slacks. "*Ugh*. This is what I get for wearing heels to tend bar." She kicked her yellow shoes off, sighing with relief as she patted the brown vinyl seat of the stool to her left. "C'mere, Ran-chan. Take a load off."

Ranma leaned her pushbroom against the service bar, smiling wistfully. It was nice to hear Ukyo's old pet name for her, even if it had been from someone else. She wondered, just for a moment, whether Ukyo might be the only one back in the Nerima district who would have understood the direction her life seemed to be taking. She strode over to the table, slumping gently onto the stool to the left of Yui, careful to account for the borrowed black calf-length skirt she was wearing.

Yui stood barefoot on the brass bar that served as the counter's footrest, leaning over the counter to grab the soda gun and pouring Ranma a drink. She slid the still-fizzing pilsner glass over to her new sister like a beer in an old-timey American saloon. "Cheers." She held up her brown glass beer bottle, tilting the neck slightly toward the redhead.

Ranma clinked her own beverage against it, smiling brightly. "Cheers!" She was grateful for some company. She was beyond appreciative for a place to stay, but when Hana and the girls went home for the night, it got a little lonely in the empty bar sometimes - especially when she'd gotten used to sleeping amidst the hustle and bustle of a subway station and, before that, in the endless chaos she'd experienced in the Tendo household.

"You've really been impressing Mama, you know."

Ranma blushed a bit shyly, her voice deflecting Yui's praise. "Yep! I'm so talented I can fill ice bins **and** work a broom."

Yui shook her head. "Not that, blockhead. Everything else. The way you've fit in here. How hard you work. The way you are with the customers. The way you helped Mei." She looked down at her bottle, swirling its contents a little. "You haven't talked a lot about what things were like for you before you came here, but it doesn't take a rocket surgeon to figure out it wasn't easy. You're one hell of a tough cookie, kiddo. Just... it's important to me that you know you don't have to hide it if you don't want to. Me, Mama, all of us are here to listen if you want."

Ranma nodded slowly, using another draught of her soda to buy herself time to decide how to answer. "I appreciate that, Yui. I do. I just... some of it I doubt anyone could understand." *You might have heard it all*, Ranma thought, *but I bet the idea of Jusenkyo would still curl your hair.*

Yui sighed quietly, motioning to Ranma's arm with her beer bottle. "If I had to wager a guess, I'd say that scar on your wrist figures into the story somewhere."

Ranma set her glass down on the wooden countertop and covered her left wrist self-consciously with her right hand, looking down a little shamefully. "Yeah, I guess it does."

The blonde bartender nodded sagely, a sadness in her eyes. "I might understand more than you think, Ranko."

The redhead shook her head, her wavy hair prickling against the last remnants of her black eye. "I strongly doubt it."

Yui tilted her bottle back, draining the rest of it into her mouth before flicking the empty bottle over the bar into a waiting trash can. She hoped the extra mouthful of liquid courage would provide a little extra fortitude for what would come next. "Let me show you something." Her voice had lost a little bit of its trademark swagger. She reached to her left wrist with her right hand, unbuttoning the cuff of her sleeve. She then did the same with her left hand, and rolled up both her sleeves to the elbow. She turned her arms at the elbows, exposing the undersides of her forearms to the pendant light hanging over Ranma's seat at the bar. Running up her arms, from the wrist about halfway up her forearm, were a pair of long, angry, jagged scars.

Ranma tried not to, but a small gasp escaped her lips anyway, that she hid behind her hand. "What... what **happened?**"

Yui sighed. "I'm guessing something not too different from what happened to you."

She looked off into the distance, wishing she'd not cast away her beer bottle and denied herself something to fidget with. "My dad was a senior manager at some fancy trading corporation downtown. He made good money, and our family did well. We spent a lot of time with the family of one of his fellow managers, the Shirikawas. I got to be really close with their daughter, *Kimiko*." She bit her bottom lip as the name escaped it, in an almost reverent tone of voice.

"One night, when I was seventeen, our four parents went out to a play, and Kimiko and I stayed at my place." She sniffled a little bit, her voice becoming more distant with each word. "My mother forgot the theater tickets, and they came home early, and found Kimiko and I... **together**... on the couch. My father was furious - all this talk about dishonoring the family, how it would ruin his career. There was so much screaming." Yui closed her eyes, raising her yellow-painted fingertips to her eyes and wiping gentle tears from them. "Kimi ran home. My father said he couldn't tolerate a... a **freak** like me in his house. He threw me out of the house that night, with only what I could carry."

Ranma's face was ashen as she listened to her new sister's story. She started to respond, but saw Yui inhale to continue speaking, and yielded.

"I walked for maybe three, four hours, and I didn't have any idea where to go. I thought maybe Kimi's parents would be more understanding, and maybe they'd let me crash there for a few days until I figured out what to do." She fidgeted idly with a coaster in her fingers, so as not to make eye contact with her companion.

"I called her house from a payphone, and her father answered. He said he'd just gotten off

the phone with my dad, and he knew everything. I begged Mr. Shirakawa for forgiveness, but he told me he would put Kimi on the phone to say goodbye, because she'd never be allowed to see me again." She shivered a little, another tear starting to slice its way through her foundation. "*He... he went to her room to get her, and...*" She relented, letting herself start to cry. It wasn't a desperate sob, but the sort of quiet sadness that comes from a wound that had started, but not yet finished, healing. "*He found her on the floor next to an empty bottle of her mother's sleeping pills.*"

Ranma gasped. "Oh, Yui..."

"I **killed** her, Ranko. I loved her, and I killed her as surely as if I'd shot her. And I... I couldn't live with it. I found a broken bottle in the alley right back there, and..." She held up her wrists to finish the sentence her words could not. "I **should** have died with her that night."

Ranma patted her arm reassuringly. "But Hana found you?"

Yui shook her head, trying to stop crying. "Ayako. She wrapped my arms with her scarf until the paramedics came. She saved my life. The doctors called my parents from the hospital, and they denied they even **knew me**. They didn't care what happened to me, or to Kimi. But Ayako stayed with me, and she and Mama brought me here when I got discharged."

Ranma was aghast. *What could I possibly say to something like that? Worse, does Yui think that I did this scar on my wrist myself? That I tried to... kill myself?* She supposed, in a sense, something of her did die that day. And, though she had not admitted it to any of her new coworkers and... *sisters*, strange as the word felt tickling the back of her mind, she could not deny that the thought had not occurred to her on many occasions as her money and options had dwindled while she lived on the street.

She reached across from her, putting her arms around Yui's shoulders as best she could without falling off the stool. "*Yui, I'm so sorry.*"

Yui shuddered a little bit in Ranma's arms, beginning to re-button her sleeves. "Anyway." She spoke matter-of-factly, trying to force a clinical distance from her pain to regain her composure. "We all bear the scars of the worst days of our lives," she said as she smoothed out her cuffs, "... but we don't have to let them *define us*." She nodded resolutely, trying to will herself back out of the dark place she had allowed herself to visit. She reached over the bar, getting herself another beer from the ice well and popping it open with the tool on her belt. "Alright, kid. Your turn."

Ranma rocked back on the stool. How could she possibly follow Yui's story, especially when most of what she'd been through, she couldn't explain? She might not hold it against Ranma, but she doubted Yui would believe anything about the Full-Body Cat's Tongue or the cursed springs of Jusenkyo. She could prove it, she supposed, but the catharsis she'd get from sharing that experience wasn't worth the mental or physical agony involved with taking her male form again.

"Yui, I wish I could tell you everything. Believe me, I do. I... I really do feel like I can trust you. But, some of it... I just can't right now. Maybe someday, but right now it's too soon for me. But I'll tell you what I can."

Yui nodded. "There's no pressure, Ranko. Say whatever you want. Saying *nothing* is okay too. I just wanted you to know I'm in a position to understand, and maybe even *help*. We're

all here for you.”

Ranma took a deep breath and let it out slowly. Time for some really interesting tap dancing. She didn't want to lie to them any more, but she also wasn't ready to let the cat, or its tongue, fully out of the bag just yet. She wasn't sure she ever wanted them to know her real name, or the circumstances that brought this redheaded girl into existence.

“So, hell, where do I start? Well, I told you that my pop had me in an arranged marriage to his friend's kid. It turns out, he'd actually promised me to more than one person. So they all were fighting over who got to have me, and nobody stopped to listen to what I wanted - and I was pretty much always in the crossfire. Every time one of them would do something shady, the others would blame me, and so I was constantly getting in trouble for stuff, and getting jumped on my way to school, and getting... *groped and kissed* by random guys. I was just trying to figure out what I was supposed to do with myself, ya know? I couldn't really have friends, 'cause everybody I could hang out with either wanted to kick my ass for not picking their favorite person to marry, or to kick my ass because they wanted to date somebody I was promised to, or who just wanted *me*.”

Yui rested her fingers comfortingly on the back of Ranma's hand on the bar counter, saying nothing and letting her continue to tell her story.

“Well, one of the other families I was promised to was big into this weird Chinese law thing where it was, like, really bad for their honor if I turned them down. And...” She swallowed her saliva, trying to find a way to explain that could keep both its vagueness and her composure intact. “It's not that I didn't pick them; I didn't pick *anybody*. I just wanted to be left alone, to figure out what the hell was going on in my *own* head before I worried about settling down with anybody. But that wasn't enough for them, and... they *hurt* me. *Bad*. To *punish* me.”

Discussing her challenges with engagements and relationships was getting really tricky without using names or genders, but she continued. “And it... it *broke* something in me - something that can't ever be fixed. After that, none of them wanted me anymore. Even my father was done with me because he couldn't sell me off for anything else, and because I couldn't carry on his precious legacy. I was *damaged goods*. My father and I were still staying with his friend's family, so I was stuck living under the same roof with the person I was supposed to marry, when we weren't gonna get married anymore. It was... *awkward*. Plus, they let their creepy old sensei stay there sometimes, and he...” She shuddered. “Let's just say grappling isn't the *only* way he likes to put his hands on girls.”

Yui cringed, saying nothing and letting the younger girl continue.

“I couldn't stay there and feel like the only one who wanted me there was an ancient lecher. I felt like a total freeloader when I couldn't keep up my end of the deal. So, I left. Almost no money, no plan, two changes of clothes, like an idiot, in the middle of the night. I got as far as Shibuya, and I ran out of money. Was living rough for six or seven weeks - I honestly lost count - sleeping in the park by the train station, applying for jobs and not having much luck, and then I found this place.”

Yui sighed. *Poor thing*. The new girl hadn't said it, but Yui could read between the lines. *One of the jerk suitors must have gotten jealous, and injured her in such a way that she couldn't have children anymore. It explains why her father wouldn't have his line continued, and all of her suitors would have given up on her. And then she must have tried to take her own life, like I did. Hence the scar*. She hadn't said that part either, but Yui was pretty confident with

her analysis. She wished the kid's father would walk into the bar right at that moment. She might not be half the fighter the new girl was, but she would gladly accept the opportunity to pummel the bastard's face in with the baseball bat she kept under the bar counter if she could.

Yui squeezed Ranma's hand tightly in her own. "We're glad you did find us, Ranko. **So glad.** I can't fathom why anybody wouldn't want you, but I know **we** do. Look at me. Listen to me. **You are wanted. You have worth. You have people that care about you.**" She spoke slowly, forcefully and deliberately, enunciating each syllable for maximum clarity and precision.

Ranma scoffed and turned her eyes to the back wall of the bar, blushing dismissively. "I don't know about all th.."

The blonde released her hand, instead taking Ranma's chin firmly in her hand and physically turning her head until the pair made eye contact. "**Say it.**"

The redhead blinked in surprise. "Say *what?*"

Yui repeated her words more firmly, still holding the redhead's chin and forcing her to look forward into her eyes. She was determined that her young protégé would internalize her words - they had saved her life, and those of all of her sisters. They had been Hana's words to her, once, and she was committed to ensuring her family's youngest ward understood the lesson. She would see to it that her new sister would learn from her misfortunes. "**I am wanted. I have worth. I have people who care about me.**"

Ranma blushed, considering the whole exercise to be more than a little silly. "Okay. Yeah. I know. I got it."

Yui shook her head. "**Say it,** Ranko. Out loud. You need to **hear** yourself say it. Saying it to me now makes it so much easier to say it to **yourself**, on the days when everything else in the world is lying to you. On the days when you need the reminder in order to believe it - because you can't *ever* let a day go by that you don't believe it. It keeps you going. It keeps you *alive*. So, **say it.**"

Ranma's eyes widened. *Man, she's frickin' serious about this!* She lowered her eyes, a little embarrassed to be participating in the strange self-affirming ritual. "*I... I am wanted?*"

Yui nodded emphatically, giving the redhead's hand another squeeze. "Yes, you are. By all of us. We're so glad you're here. What else?"

Ranma's tentative, mouselike voice strained to maintain any semblance of conviction as she mumbled the next phrase of the mantra. "*I have... worth?*"

Yui nodded again, smiling reassuringly. "**Damn right** you do. So much more than you could ever know. And what else?"

Then, and only then, could Ranma voluntarily raise her eyes to meet Yui's. At least the third part of the repeated affirmation, the women of the Phoenix had managed to convince her was true. "*I have people that care about me.*"

Yui reached across the gap between the barstools, pulling the slender redhead into a tight

hug. “And don’t you **dare** forget it, Ranko. Not fucking **ever.**”

Ranma spun her empty cork board serving tray in her hands, a song in her heart. Hana and the girls had fawned over her so much since the fight, and she couldn't remember a time where she had felt so comfortable in her own skin. Certainly not since Jusenkyo. Granted, a significant chunk of the personality her coworkers and - dare she say, *adoptive family* - had been getting to know over the last week was a lie. She suspected that there would be some awkward conversations, but for the time being, she was just happy to have a place - and a tribe - in which she could feel like she belonged. Dare she hope - a *family*?

She'd even felt confident enough in herself when she woke that Friday morning to brave the lavender sundress she found in her closet, and not entirely because everything other than dresses was in the laundry, either. She hadn't re-braided her hair since Izumi had undone it days ago, and while its unruly motion had been a bit annoying during the fight in the alley, she was certainly enjoying the absence of the ever-present headache from her hair being pulled tight at the scalp. She flushed visibly whenever she thought about it, but when she caught a glimpse of herself in the mirrored back wall behind the bar counter, she almost - *almost* - felt **cute**.

"Oi, Ranko! Table six!"

Ranma broke eye contact with herself, shaking her head with flushed cheeks and a self-admonishing smirk. *Over here preening at myself in the mirror when I've got work to do. Like... a girl.* She scooted over to the bar, picking up three yellowish cocktails and a basket of fried shrimp. She smiled brightly, acknowledging Yui as she moved the items to her tray. Yui was grinning too; it felt so good to see the poor kid smile, even if the younger girl did seem awfully freaked out whenever she was asked to carry one of the bar's signature *Dragonfire* cocktails to a table. For some reason, the redhead seemed more concerned than most about the blue flames rising from the burning 151-proof rum floated atop the cocktails coming anywhere near her skin.

After their conversation the night before, Yui felt as if she had a better understanding of why smiles had been rare on the Phoenix's newest ward. She had also noticed that the new server could not seem to take her eyes off of herself in the mirror, and wondered if Izumi's dress from the closet upstairs was the only reason. The new girl had come off as something of a dour tomboy since she'd been staying at the Phoenix. *Then again*, Yui thought, *if I went through what it sounds like she has, I wouldn't feel especially womanly, either.* In the moment, though, there was an undeniable radiance about Ranma. She had been on her feet nonstop for six hours, but she looked like she was walking on clouds.

It was Izumi's night off, so Ranma was managing table service on her own, with the occasional assist from Hana. She was holding up fairly well, despite the bar having served drinks at a steady clip all evening. *Typical for a Friday*, Mei had told her. They had karaoke going on at the tiny corner stage; Ranma deduced the machine must have been added after the bar's construction because the space wasn't broken up into smaller rooms like other karaoke bars she'd heard about. While most of the singers were pretty bad, the guests seemed to be having a good time owing to a steady flow of liquid courage. That meant a steady flow of income to the bar, though, and Ranma was glad for it. *Hopefully me being here is helping them as much as it's been helping me*, she thought as she picked up the pen

she'd left for the last table to sign their credit card receipt and slipped it into her pocket. She was also glad that the dress she was wearing *had* pockets. She didn't understand why girls didn't want *all* their dresses to have pockets; they were so *convenient!*

Noticing a lull in the needs of her guests, Ranma started piling dirty glasses into the dishwasher. On the stage, a heavysset man in business attire finished his butchering of Madonna's *Like a Virgin* and sat back at his table to a smattering of polite applause. A trio of young women in matching yellow taffeta dresses - a bachelorette party, they'd told Ranma - went on stage together, one of them selecting a popular Japanese pop song from the computer on the folding table to stage left.

Ranma started the dishwasher, doing a quick scan of her tables to see if anyone seemed to need anything. All of her customers looked well-satiated for the moment, so Ranma pushed through the blue swinging door to the back room to see if Hana had any tasks for her. She found the bar's proprietress in her office, looking over some paperwork. She seemed kind of worried, and very busy, so Ranma thought it best to leave her to her work. Instead, the server returned to the front room, slid behind the service bar and poured herself a cup of soda, leaning against the wall for a quick moment. She could feel the wall vibrating slightly with the bass from the eighteen thousand watts of sound thumping through the building's frame.

"Who's next?" she heard Mei call out to the crowd on the wireless dynamic house microphone from the stage after the three young women finished singing. "Come on, **somebody's** gotta be brave enough to come up here and sing for us!" It was getting late, and the patrons remaining in the bar must have all had far too much to drink to brave an attempt to carry a tune, because Mei was getting no takers.

Seeming to give up, Mei sidled around the service bar, smiling a bit deviously at the new girl. "Hey Ranko, can you come here and give me a hand with something?"

Ranma blinked, peeling her eyes off of the mirror behind the bar again. *Gods, what the heck's getting into me tonight?* She shook her head forcefully, willing some of the butterflies in her mind to evacuate through her ears, and called back with a "Sure thing!" She finished her soda in a single draught, setting her glass in the sink. Ranko smiled brightly. She was glad to be of help to the women who had declared themselves her new *family* in any way she could. "Whatcha need, Mei?"

The blue-haired girl said nothing. She just reached out and handed Ranma a small metal cylinder. Ranma looked down at her hand and her eyes grew wide. "**No. Uh-uh. No way!**"

Mei nudged the microphone in Ranma's hand closer to the younger girl's chest. "Aww, come on! I heard you sing the other day. You were **great!**"

Ranma blushed, shaking her head trepidatiously. "But that was to myself! This is in front of people, who are like, paying money to be here and stuff!"

Mei grinned deviously, tilting her head toward the stage. "Sounds to me like it's your first concert, rock star! Go on, get up there!"

Ranma shook her head vigorously, taking a step back behind the counter. "... I *can't!* I need to take care of my tables."

With a mischievous grin, Mei snatched up Ranma's serving tray. "I got it." The redhead looked around the room for another excuse - *any* other excuse - but was running out of ideas fast.

"Leave the poor kid be, Mei!" Yui called over from the bar.

"No, Yui, you don't understand! I've heard her. She's **amazing!**" Ranma blushed even deeper as Mei spoke, especially once she realized that the crowd was hearing the entire conversation over the hot microphone in her hand.

Mei pulled Ranma's wrist up, bringing the steel microphone with it. "What do you think, folks? Who wants to hear Ranko **sing?**" A raucous cry of approval came from the mostly inebriated crowd at the side of the bar closest to the stage; most of the tables at the far side near the front door were still focusing more on their food and conversation.

Ranma thought she would pass out if any more blood flowed to her face. "I will **get you** for this, Mei Hotaro," she said as she mock-gloved at her antagonist. However, she did tentatively walk in the direction of the stage, mindful of every pair of eyes on her as she stepped up onto the raised platform. Mei, controlling the karaoke machine from the computer on the little folding table near the arcade machine, selected the Japanese pop song she'd caught Ranma singing a few days ago.

Ranma looked up at Mei like a deer in headlights, but Mei just gave her an encouraging smile and mouthed "*you got this*" silently. Yui bounced a bottle of tequila across four cocktail glasses at a four-count each, flashing her own hopeful smile up at the nervous redhead before reaching for the lime juice. The intro to the song began to play, and Ranma swallowed hard, grateful she'd just had something to drink to counteract the dry mouth her nerves were well on their way to creating.

Ranma took a deep breath, fidgeting on her feet, and closed her eyes. *If I can't see them, maybe they can't see me.* It was ridiculous, she knew, but it gave her just enough courage to hit the first note. Her voice was tentative and quiet, but she made it through the first line, and then a second, and she started to hear the scrape of chairs on the wooden floor. *Half a verse and I'm running them off already,* she thought to herself.

She opened her eyes to witness the carnage, and what she found instead was that nearly everyone in the bar had turned their chairs to face the stage. The conversations at the various tables had largely ceased. She blushed again, shrinking a bit in her stature at the attention. As the first verse ended, the crowd, sensing her apprehension, gave her an encouraging round of applause and cheers, and Ranma couldn't help but smile.

Well, to hell with it, she thought to herself. *I've already made as big of an ass of myself as I can up here, I might as well have fun with it.* When the lyrics of the second verse began to change color on the karaoke monitor to her left, Ranma again began to sing, this time with her full chest voice. It was a fairly slow ballad, and her voice carried hauntingly over the speakers throughout the bar. Mei had stopped to stand behind the bar counter and Yui put her strainer and shaker down, as neither had any customers who wanted to pay attention to their drink orders at the moment anyway.

As Ranma sang the chorus, the saloon door swung open and Hana emerged, standing in the doorway and leaning in the archway behind Mei. Her face showed an air of curiosity at first at how quiet the bar had sounded from her office, but once she saw who was on stage,

and the rapt attention of her patrons, she crossed her arms over her chest and smiled proudly at her youngest ward.

Mei leaned over to Yui. ***“I told you*** she was great,” Mei whispered, and Yui could only nod in assent. The blonde’s eyes were transfixed on the stage.

Ranma’s voice ramped up for the more powerful final verse of the song, adding a few little runs in some of the longer notes. She was still blushing, but she was also smiling broadly. No one had ever adulated her for anything that hadn’t resulted in anybody getting their asses kicked before. Now this whole room of people, for whom she was good enough for nothing but fetching their onion rings and shots not ten minutes ago, was enchanted by her voice. It felt strange and glorious and liberating and terrifying all at once, and Ranma channeled all of that emotion into belting the final note of the song, a G in the fourth octave that lasted a full five seconds. When she lowered the microphone, there was a second or two of stunned silence, and then the assembled patrons began to clap.

And cheer.

And stand.

All of them.

Ranma blushed more furiously than she thought possible, bowing deeply to the crowd in part to have an excuse to hide her face. ***“Thank you,”*** she whispered into the microphone before placing it back into the little clamp at the top of its metal stand. Mei and Yui were clapping too, but Hana slipped out from behind the bar to meet Ranma as she descended from the tiny stage in the corner.

Ranma looked up at her with a worried expression. “I’m sorry; I know I shouldn’t have done that while I was working, Mei asked me...”

She trailed off as Hana hushed her with a raised hand. “Ranko... honey, that was – you are – ***incredible.***” She reached out, pulling her teenage charge into a congratulatory hug. The crowd was only just beginning to cease their clapping and return to their food or drinks. Ranma couldn’t hear it, but more than half the conversations at the tables were about what they had just heard.

Yui joined the pair near the triangular wooden stage, grinning at Ranma when Hana released her. “You keep ***that*** up, Ranko Tendo, and ***everybody’s*** going to know your name before too long.”

Ranma gulped. *Not only do they not know my name, but you don’t either,* she thought to herself, her joy at the audience’s adulation quickly giving way to a sense of shame. She hated how dishonest she felt in the presence of her new family. *I did what I had to do, but I don’t gotta feel good about it.*

She didn’t have time to focus on it, though, because Mei tossed her cork board serving tray back to her like a frisbee. “Your public awaits, Miss Tendo.” With a chuckle and a blush, Ranma headed toward the closest table.

Each table she visited went much the same. There was universally effusive praise for both her singing and her service. The women from the bachelorette party produced a Polaroid

camera and asked Ranma to take a picture with them. She squirmed, but Mei walked up behind them and took the camera. "Everybody smile now!" Mei commanded, and Ranma was amazed at how easy she found it to comply.

Shortly after, last call was announced and the customers began to make their exits. Ranma buzzed around the tables after them, collecting checks and empty glassware. She couldn't stop thinking about what Yui had said. *Everyone will know your name*. How could that be, when no one did? She had left the name Ranma Saotome behind a week ago, and – she hoped – all the baggage that came with it. All the fights. All the proposals. All the drama. She didn't want any of it anymore. She just wanted a chance to *live*. Finding a way back to her male body was still a fantasy, but far less of a determination than it had been at any point since the Cat's Tongue. Perhaps it was that time was robbing her of hope, but she wasn't sure a part of it hadn't been that she was discovering a happiness and an independence as *Ranko* that Ranma had not known and might never know. That said, she was living a lie, and she hated it.

Ranma caught another glimpse of herself in the mirrored wall behind the liquor display while dropping off a load of empty glasses. This time, she stopped to really examine herself. The bruise on her face was gone. Her hair hung in a loose, wavy curl over her right shoulder, still retaining some of the shape of being trained into a braid for years. The dress wasn't really anything she would have worn before "it" happened. It would have looked ridiculous on Ranma Saotome, but somehow, once she stopped forcing herself to think about it as a boy would have, she found that it suited *Ranko* a lot better. In fact, Ranma wasn't sure if Akane would recognize her if she walked through the door right then. Just the way she *stood* was different - her posture was one of confident poise, and not the perpetual anguish and shame of the last few months.

It's all a lie. It isn't real. Nothing about it is real. I'm not Ranko, I'm not really a girl, I'm really... She shook her head, sighing. Maybe it *wasn't* real, but there was a voice inside of her, the one who didn't care about the dresses as much as she did the hugs and encouragement and - dare she say, **love** - that **wanted** it to be. She wished in that moment, ridiculous as it was, that she could erase the whole of her past and make the lies she had told the truth, just so she'd never lose the first real acceptance she'd ever found.

She made a fist, biting her jagged fingernails into her palm. That day on the mountainside with Koh Lon played through her mind on repeat. The day her life as she knew it had ended for good. When a relationship with Akane had become impossible, and when it had become all but guaranteed that she could never again meaningfully take a form other than the one she now inhabited. It was the day she lost all hope that there was a place for her with the Tendo family, and the day Genma and Soun stopped looking at her with even the faint inkling of pride they had managed before. It was, for all intents and purposes, the day a boy named Ranma Saotome died.

But... if Ranma had died, then *whose life was she living?* Not his, for sure - he wouldn't be caught dead in that lavender dress, standing on that stage, or tittering and joking with the women who ran the Phoenix. And yet, the young woman in the mirror couldn't think of anything she wanted more. It was only the memory of the boy she had once been that forbade her from allowing herself to truly embrace the life she was starting to cobble together, brick by brick, day by day.

She wasn't relying on any of her old tricks and scams, like play-flirting with someone for a free octopus puff. Nor was she getting by on her fighting skill, or leaning on any of her old

connections. Everything good she had experienced over the last few days was built by the slender, feminine hands that she now called her own, probably forever. This *new* person, whoever *she* was, had earned every bit of the happiness she currently felt with her own charm, her own kindness, and her own work ethic and determination. It was *hers*, and that didn't *feel* like a lie. The boy she had once been had his martial arts mastery, a fiancée (or four), a place to live, and everything else about his life foisted upon him without having ever chosen any of it for himself. Back at the Tendo place, Ranma didn't even do half of her homework on her own; Nabiki had earned herself more than a few new pairs of shoes out of her math classes alone. Ranma owned *nothing* about her old life. But whatever little this *new* person had, it was *hers*, and it was *real*, and she *deserved* it, and she *wanted* it.

Ranma made up her mind. She knew what had to be done.

"Hana, may I please be excused for a few minutes?"

The leather-clad barkeep nodded with an easy smile. "Of course, Ranko." She could see deep thoughts roiling in the young girl's eyes, and figured the experience on stage had more profoundly impacted her than Hana had originally thought.

Ranma pushed through the saloon door, walking up the stairs to her right and popping open the door to the little apartment she'd been staying in. She picked up the yellow plastic laundry hamper, rummaging through it for her black gi pants. When she found them, she slipped her hand into the pocket and pulled out a well-worn men's trifold leather wallet made of brown nylon.

Her hands shaking, she opened it and pulled her old Furinkan High student identification card out from behind the clear plastic window in the center panel. She had no other proof of her former existence. She stared intently into the eyes of her male self in the little square photograph affixed to the card, sitting on the edge of the bed. She looked over the address, the name, the school name, and the emergency contact information. None of it matched her new life anymore any better than the picture did. It felt like a lifetime ago, and *someone else's* lifetime, at that.

She gazed wistfully at the laminated blue card in her hand, speaking aloud into the eyes of her former body in the photograph as if they were a Ouija board. "*I'm sorry. I am. I tried. I swear I did.*" Her eyes welled with tears, but not necessarily sad ones. "*I've fought this as hard as I could, for as long as I could. I tried everything. But, it's time.*"

Ranma stood, slowly and resolutely, and made her way to the little gas cooktop in the corner of her studio apartment. With the slight turn of a knob and push of a little red button, she ignited the pilot light under the ceramic tea kettle. She looked again into her own eyes in celluloid, turning the card slightly. When she did, its glossy coating caught a glint from the ceiling light, causing a reflection of her face to appear superimposed over her male form's photograph. "I've carried you as far as I can. Your ghost is drowning us both. Every day I spend trying to **save you** is a day I don't get to spend figuring out **who I am**. I can't do it anymore. *I deserve to live.*"

She swallowed hard, a tear rolling down her cheek. "I'm sorry I couldn't save you. I'm sorry you didn't get a chance. But I have a chance now, a real one, and just this once, I choose to **save myself**. I have to." She steeled herself, trying to convince the pretty girl looking back at her in the full-length mirror mounted to the back of the closet door that the flicker of hope in her heart was real. "*I am wanted, I have worth, and I have people who care about me.*" She

smiled ever so slightly. Yui was right; it did help a little.

With a determined sigh, Ranma picked the tea kettle up off the burner, placing it on the cold burner next to it. The radiant heat of the flame below her wrist prickled at her skin, but the discomfort did not come with the same searing feeling of shame accompanying it that it usually did.

I am wanted. I have worth. I have people who care about me. I am wanted. I have worth. I have people who care about me.

Ranma reached her trembling hand forward, letting the corner of the little card make contact with the blue flame from the burning gas, and it started to catch. She dropped it quickly into the drip pan to avoid the agony of a burn, and watched as her photo began to shrivel and blacken. Simultaneous tears of sadness and relief began to flow from her eyes as the last corner of the card vanished into ash, the stench of burnt plastic from the laminate assaulting her nostrils.

As it did, a pair of soft beeps from the digital alarm clock on the nightstand indicated the stroke of midnight. It was November twenty-fifth. She looked back at herself in the mirror, wiped away her tears and smiled confidently at her reflection. Her shoulders were back, and her spine was straight. Where shame had once resided, pride now reigned.

“Happy birthday, **Ranko.**”

Ranko cursed under her breath, dumping another pan of charred eggs into the trash receptacle atop her previous three attempts at breakfast. She was determined to get the recipe right, but it was hard standing close to the gas cooktop long enough to scramble the eggs, considering she could stand half a meter away from the blue ring of flame and still feel like she was going to pass out from the radiant heat. Fortunately, the late November air was cool and crisp, and she'd opened the window right next to the cooktop to vent out some of the warm air from her tiny kitchenette space.

It's fine. I just wanna learn how to cook a little bit. It's not like I've decided I'm gonna run out and find a dude to marry or anything! It's not Kasumi's stupid bridal training. I just don't wanna starve. Besides, if I'm gonna pull off this whole 'living as a girl full time' thing, I'm gonna have to try to stop freaking out and feeling weird and gross every time I do a girly thing. It's never gonna feel normal unless I decide to let it.

She blushed, trying to push the intrusive thoughts from her mind. She turned off the burner, her eyes lingering on the tiny pile of ash in the drip pan that had been the last remnant of her former life. Her eyes were still locked on it when there was a knock at her door.

"*What the...*" She frantically fanned the smell of burnt eggs out the open window with the back of the skillet. "Uhh, **come in?**"

Izumi entered the room, wearing a brown coat lined with faux leopard fur over a white sweater and a hot pink knee-length skirt. "Good morning, Ranko!" She hopped excitedly onto the foot of the still-unmade bed. "Mei told me *everything* about last night. I'm so sorry I missed it! I hope I'll get another chance to see you sing! How did it feel?"

Ranko blushed more brightly. She was prepared to see her coworker - and, apparently, her new *sister* - first thing in the morning, but her *fan club* might have to wait until the caffeine kicked in. She'd taken to drinking soda instead of tea in the mornings, as it was freely available downstairs and, as an added bonus, did not feel like lava being poured down her throat when she drank it.

She grabbed one of the wooden chairs from around her tiny square dining table, carrying it closer to the bed. She started to sit on it backward and straddle it, before remembering that she was wearing a dress. *I guess I gotta learn to do the whole 'lady' thing, if I'm gonna pull this off.* Turning the chair forward, she sat down carefully, minding her skirt. "Hey, Izzi. You're here early today." She glanced over at the digital alarm clock on the nightstand, which still read 8:04 AM. "**Very** early."

The older girl laughed. "Trust me, when you have kids, you'll forget what sleep feels like, too."

Ranko blushed again, even more deeply this time. She seemed to be doing that a lot more lately. "Yeeaaaah, let's not get ahead of ourselves on **that** one, 'kay? Anyway, why did you come in so early today? Your shift doesn't start until two usually."

Izumi waved her off. "Sometimes it's just good to get out of the house and let Kaito and

Hoshi have some *boy time*. And, more importantly, it lets me have some **grownup** time. It's been three years, and I still swear to the gods, if I ever hear about that damned *itsy bitsy spider* one more fucking time..."

Ranko giggled and rolled her eyes. "Now **that** is a karaoke event I'd pay to see."

The brunette shook her head. "Not in a million years. But **you** – our very own pop idol? Who knew?!"

Ranko hid her face behind her hands. *More of that damned blushing again. Stop it, face!* "Don't get carried away. I impressed thirty drunks, and half of them probably were just hoping I'd take my top off. And I'm still gonna kill Mei for putting me up to that, by the way, so if you have any last words you'd like to say to her first..."

Izumi grinned, throwing a pillow at the younger girl. "Admit it! You had the time of your life up there, didn't you?"

I swear, I don't understand why girls need makeup for their cheeks if all they ever do is freaking blush. Ranko didn't say anything, but she did give a guilty nod, and that sent Izumi into another fit of giggling.

When her laughing subsided, Izumi looked Ranko over a bit. She was wearing a white short-sleeved dress with a rosette at the base of the neckline, a mid-calf length skirt, and an embroidered pattern of white roses throughout. Somehow, it had seemed appropriate for her first day of thinking of herself as a bona fide girl. It had a white satin sash around the waist, tied in a bow at the back. Ranko would have taken it off; she thought that might be a little much, but it was sewn to the dress. Izumi knew the outfit well; it was hers. "I gotta say, you clean up good, kid."

Ranko hid her face again. "I swear, if you don't stop making me blush, I'm gonna black out from lack of blood to my, *everything that isn't my face!*" If she was going to spend the rest of her life as a girl, though, she was at least glad she was a pretty one. It opened a lot of doors for girls, she had learned.

"One sec." Izumi got up and bounced into the bathroom, opening one of the drawers. She returned with a small white object in her hand. "Here." She brushed her hand forward into Ranko's hair, pushing it out of her face, and pinning it back over her ear with a white lace bow on a banana clip.

Ranko wasn't sure how she felt about putting bows in her hair, but she had to admit it was nice to have it out of her face and at the same time, not in the braid that tugged eternally on her sensitive scalp. She craned her neck over Izumi to look into the mirror on the back of the closet door, and she couldn't help but acknowledge that she did look kind of cute. Harder still for her was acknowledging that not only was she cute, but she didn't **entirely** hate it.

"Get your shoes and come downstairs with me."

Ranko nodded, happy to oblige. She'd left her room in something of a state of disarray last night after her epiphany, and was a little bit embarrassed by it. After all, she was a guest, and she was determined to be respectful of the space she was being offered.

She bounded down the stairs after Izumi, and was surprised to be greeted in the bar kitchen

by Hana. “Man, does **nobody** sleep on Saturdays around here? Good morning, Hana.”

The bar’s matriarch waved with a warm smile. “Good morning, Ranko. Aww, don’t **you** look pretty today?”

Ranko smiled, trying not to blush for a change. She failed miserably. “Thank you. Apparently I have a second job as Izzi’s personal dress-up model.”

Izumi laughed from a stool at the far end of the prep counter, affecting a posh accent. “And you’re **fahhhbulous, dahhling**. Simply smashing.”

Ranko looked around, seeing that Hana already had a fair amount of prep work done, but nothing being prepared seemed to match the types of food that the Phoenix normally served. “Okay, I’ll bite. What’s going on with all this stuff?”

Izumi gestured to the trays. “Somebody booked the whole place for a private party tonight. Some super-important brat or something.”

Ranko nodded, picking up a black apron from a hook on the wall. She didn’t normally wear them, but she was wearing all white, and she didn’t want to risk damaging Izumi’s dress. “What can I do to help?”

Hana set her whisk down, walking over to the redhead and snatching the apron from her hands before she could get it over her head. “**You** can do *absolutely nothing*. It’s your day off, young lady.”

Ranko blinked in surprise. She hadn’t seen a schedule, but she had somewhat assumed that she would work every night so long as she was getting free room and board. “Are you sure? There looks like so much work to do, and you said it’s always busiest on Saturdays! I’m happy to pitch in. It’s the **least** I can do, after everything you’ve done for me. Come on, Izzi, let’s give her a hand.”

Izumi smirked, shaking her head and crossing her legs on the footrest of her steel stool. She folded her hands idly on the metal counter. “Sorry! No can do! It’s my day off, too.”

Ranko looked at her incredulously. *After everything Hana’s done for her, she won’t even pitch in and help? How freaking ungrateful could you be?* “If you’re not scheduled to work, what the heck are you even doing here? And at the butt-crack of dawn, no less?!”

Hana turned, grinning at Izumi over her shoulder. “You didn’t tell her.” She didn’t pause her stirring.

“I did not,” Izzi replied with a devious smirk.

Ranko looked between the two women, a mystified expression crossing her face. “Okay, you’re **both** making me nervous now.”

Izumi rose from her stool, making her way toward the redhead at the entrance to the kitchen. “I’ve been given an important mission. One that I am uniquely qualified to handle.” She took Ranko’s hand. “I am under strict orders to get you the hell out of this bar for a few hours and show you a good time. You haven’t seen anything outside these doors in days.”

Ranko laughed a bit nervously. "That's not true. I totally took the trash out on Wednesday!" She turned to Hana. "But, are you **sure** you don't need help? I really don't mind."

Hana waved her off. "Mei and Yui will be here any minute. I'll be fine. Go on, get upstairs and get your stuff. **Now**, missy."

Ranko stepped back, putting her hands up with a bright smile. "Okay, okay, I surrender! Be right back." She darted back up the narrow stairway, pushing the door open. She rushed to the dinette table, grabbing her wallet. She looked at it with some measure of disdain - it was quite obvious that it wasn't the sort of thing a girl would carry, and she couldn't exactly hide it anywhere. The white dress she had borrowed did not sport the miraculous pockets of the lavender one she wore the day before. *Crap. I don't even have socks to stuff it in.* Not knowing what else to do, she pulled the few bills from her billfold and rolled them up, palming them in her hand and heading downstairs.

Izumi held the heavy back door to the alleyway as soon as Ranko appeared at the foot of the stairs, motioning to her. "Come on, you!" As Ranko approached, the brunette took her by the wrist and pulled her along, not entirely gently.

A few minutes later, the girls found themselves seated next to each other on a train heading into the Shibuya shopping district. "So, listen, Ranko," her companion began, "If you can think of anything fun you'd like to do, let me know. Besides that, is there anything you need? I know you kinda..." She looked around the train, not wanting to embarrass her friend and new surrogate sister. "... *packed light.*"

Ranko nodded, appreciating Izumi's discretion. The reality was, she knew there were almost certainly things she needed, but she had no idea how to shop for them, and there was no way she could reasonably ask about it without looking like she had no idea how to be a girl. *Last thing I need is getting figured out on day one.*

"Hey, is your hand okay? You've had it in a fist since we got on the train." Izumi motioned to Ranko's left arm, which the redhead held cradled in her lap.

Ranko blushed, wincing a bit with embarrassment. "Yeah! I just didn't have any pockets, so..."

Izumi shook her head in disbelief. "You don't have a purse?"

The younger girl shook her head. "No, I... *um... lost it?*" A lie, but it beat the hell out of saying *I've only been a girl for eight months, and haven't really thought about it.*

"Okay. First order of business, then. We need to get you a bag. Fortunately for you, you are in the presence of a grand master black belt shopper." Izumi made a mocking little gesture like she was taking a karate stance, swinging her flattened palms around in the air in front of herself.

Though Ranko was a bit embarrassed, she couldn't help but laugh. Izumi's form was **terrible**. "Yeesh! Well, Izzi, how's about we leave the shopping to you, and the martial arts to me?"

The older girl shook her head. "Better idea. Let's teach each other."

Careful what you wish for, Ranko thought. *I don't think either of us are ready for that.*

The doors of the train hissed open, and Izumi stood, shouldering her purse. "C'mon, Ranko. This is our stop."

Ranko stood and followed, having really no earthly idea what she had gotten herself into by agreeing to go on the impromptu trip. She was concerned about spending a day shopping; she had made some money over the last week, but not nearly enough that she could afford to be frivolous.

Izumi led her out of the train station and down the sidewalk for about half a block, turning down a long walkway toward a large indoor shopping mall. Everywhere, people - mostly women, some accompanied by their husbands - scurried this way and that, paper sacks swinging on twine handles from their wrists. Ranko scurried to the other side of Izumi, clinging onto her wrist and hiding behind her somewhat.

"Hey, what are you..." Izumi sighed softly. "You're okay, sweetheart. There's no need to be nervous."

Ranko swallowed hard. "I just... I feel so out of place here. This isn't normal for me. I don't want to embarrass you."

Izumi stopped, turning to Ranko and shaking her head. "Honey, you're not embarrassing me. Not at all. I mean it. Don't you **ever** think that."

The redhead nodded, managing a small smile and following as Izumi resumed walking. *I am wanted*, Ranko thought to herself. *I have worth. I have people who care about me.* She smiled more fully when Izumi pulled open the glass door to the shopping center, holding it open behind her for Ranko.

"So, this is a good place to start." Izumi led her companion into a small shop containing dozens of little white cylindrical podiums, each displaying some different sort of purse or bag, with little spotlights highlighting each one. Metal racks holding more assorted bags were mounted to the walls, and multi-level displays dominated the aisles. Here and there, plastic bins containing even more bags could be found.

Ranko looked around in disbelief. *Do girls actually need so many of these things? How the hell do you even... fuck. I don't stand a chance.*

"Do you see anything you like?" Izumi nudged Ranko's hip with her own, stirring her out of her bewilderment.

Ranko looked around, utterly devoid of any idea where to start. She turned to Izumi and shrugged. "I'm... not exactly the poster child for **cute**. Do you have any advice?"

Izumi looked her over head to toe. "Girl, if you don't think **you** can pull off **cute**, there's no hope for any of us."

Ranko's face caught fire, and she looked down at her feet demurely. It only enhanced the effect in Izumi's eyes.

"Okay. We're not looking for something specialized to match an outfit perfectly or anything.

We want something a little more neutral that can go with everything. So we're looking mostly for black, white, gray or tan. That eliminates about half the store. Making progress! Now, you don't have a ton of stuff to carry; eventually you might need a decent-sized bag like this one for makeup and stuff, but for right now we're looking for keys, wallet, identification, stuff like that. So we don't need anything huge. We're not going formal gowns, so clutches are out; we want something with backpack straps or a shoulder strap."

Ranko watched her work with wide eyes. *This is like a science to her. It's honestly kind of impressive.*

"Since it's going to be a daily driver, we probably want to nix white; it'll show a lot of scuffs if you carry it all the time. Something darker will look good longer with repeated use. So, I think we're looking black or dark gray, small sized, shoulder straps or backpack straps. There can't be too many of those. Let's start looking!" Izumi scurried off toward a large spinning aluminum display rack to her left.

Ranko was tempted to follow, but clearly the expectation was that she could hold her own, so she decided to try. Walking by several dozen options that Izumi's exacting criteria had eliminated, she picked up a pewter-colored shoulder bag. It was large enough to maybe carry two or three times the volume of the masculine wallet she'd left back at the bar, though she suspected that would be getting retired. The strap was a silver-colored metal chain. She picked it up, not sure at all what to do next. Izumi was on the entirely opposite side of the store, blazing through the displays like a bargain-seeking missile, so Ranko decided to carry the candidate bag with her and continue looking.

The next bag she picked up was a black leather bag that was taller than it was wide, with a long black shoulder strap. It had a flap that opened from the top and buckled in the front with a silver clasp that was shaped like a rose. A border of white flowers lined the edge of the flap on three sides. It looked like it could hold perhaps a small hardcover book. Ranko picked it up, looking at it with the sort of mystified expression that one would expect to see on someone that had just encountered an alien.

"Oh, now *that* is *cute!*"

Ranko looked up from her examination as Izumi closed on her. "Huh?"

"Open it up?" Izumi closed the distance between them, looking down at the second bag Ranko had selected.

Ranko complied, unclasping the bag clumsily and gazing into its interior, though she had no idea what would constitute good or bad once she saw it.

"Okay, so it's got lots of little pockets inside. That's great if you aren't going to carry a separate wallet and everything, and you can still keep things organized. But it's got a big enough central compartment that you can carry something of decent size if you needed to." Izumi grabbed the little yellow tag dangling from the strap. "And it's on **sale**, too. You're better at this than you let on, girl!"

Ranko chuckled nervously. She hadn't gotten as far as finding the price tag, but she already dreaded it.

"Do you like it?" Izumi's eyes rose from the bag back to her new sister's face, gauging her

reaction.

Ranko shrugged, a befuddled expression on her face. "It's nice, I think." It wasn't over-the-top girly with big pink bows and sequins like a lot of what the store carried, and it did fit all of Izumi's criteria.

Izumi beamed excitedly. "Why don't we grab this one then, and if we see something else later, maybe we'll grab that, too?"

This is sounding expensive already. Ranko nodded tentatively, bowing to the pressure of the entire experience. She had planned to spend the morning peeling potatoes when she woke up, and experiencing her first shopping trip as a girl instead was still quite a culture shock for the bewildered teen.

Izumi took the bag from Ranko, setting down the selections she had made and dismissed, and carried it to the counter. Ranko began to count out her money, but Izumi waved her off. "Mama sent me with a budget. We got this. I'd tell you to put your money away, but I guess you *can't* until we finish ringing out." Izumi giggled.

Ranko smiled sheepishly. She hated the idea of more handouts, but she couldn't deny that did need some things, and didn't want to be rude and refuse. Besides, if she was going to learn to live this new life - and she had committed to herself that she would do so just a few hours earlier - she was going to need to figure a lot of things out, and Izumi was proving to be an excellent mentor whether she knew it or not.

Izumi completed the transaction, breaking the string holding the price tag onto the buckle at the base of the strap. She turned to Ranko, handing the bag to her. "Here you go!"

Ranko smiled nervously. "Thanks!" She opened the silver clasp again, finding a small pocket with a zipper closure and slipping the fistful of bills she'd been carrying for an hour into it. *At least they'll be more secure in there*, she thought. She slung the bag over her shoulder, and it hung down almost to her knees. "What do you think?"

Izumi put her head in her palm and shook her head, smiling amusedly. "Oh, honey. What are we going to do with you?" She reached over to the strap, using the buckle to tighten it to a more reasonable length, and then picked it up off of Ranko's shoulder and draped it over her head onto the opposite shoulder such that the strap crossed Ranko's torso between her breasts. "There. Much better."

Ranko agreed – not only would it not bang her knees when she walked, but having it close to her body meant it would stay put better if she had to fight while wearing it.

"Okay! On to the next stop!" The shopping spree was supposed to be Ranko's day out, but Izumi was clearly the more excited of the two women about it.

Ranko fidgeted with the bag strapped to her side, the black leather contrasting with the white dress she had on. She knew that she'd never be able to hide her confusion for long under the circumstances. She had to come up with an explanation, and fast.

"Hey, Izzi – thanks for your advice. I'm kind of embarrassed that I'm not... ya know, better at, like, fashion and style and all of that shit. I can tell it's really important to you. My dad and I left home when I was really little, so I really never got to know my mother, and I didn't have,

like, any sisters or anything. I guess I'm trying to say, I never really had any girls to learn all of this stuff from growing up. I'm really sorry; I want to be excited and all, I just kind of feel like an idiot." *A tomboy, more like.* She had thought to use that word first, but decided against it because it felt like admitting something was wrong with her. A wave of guilt crashed over her. *Is this how it felt every time I called Akane a tomboy? No wonder she was always so mad at me.* She wondered if she'd ever get a chance to apologize. She doubted it.

Izumi stopped in the middle of the mall, turning to face her companion and taking Ranko's hands in her own. "I don't know how many times we have to tell you this, Ranko, but... you **do** have sisters now. You don't have to be embarrassed about where you come from or the situation you grew up in. You don't have to apologize for your past. We've all been through hell, and none of us are in a place to judge anybody. If you want to keep doing what you're doing, that's fine. Nobody's going to try to change you. But if you want help with this stuff, we are here for you." She smirked proudly. "**Especiall**y when it comes to **style**. After all, I'm almost done with my fashion design degree."

She flashed Ranko a soft smile. "But, seriously, though. Mama took all of us in because our own families weren't there for us. But now, we've become an even stronger family because all of us **chose** to be part of it rather than being born into it by dumb luck." With a closing step, she wrapped her arm around Ranko's shoulders. "You aren't alone anymore, **little sister**. Not in this, and not in **anything**."

Ranko felt herself melt into the taller girl's arms. Not being alone anymore really did sound amazing. Even when she'd lived with the Tendos, with six other people in the house, she always felt like she was on an island of her own and nobody truly understood her, or cared to try. "I don't know what I did to deserve meeting you all, but I'm glad."

Izumi pulled back from the hug so she could look sincerely into Ranko's blue eyes. "We all are, too." She took Ranko by the hand again. "This must be so overwhelming for you. You've been with us barely a week and here we are, declaring ourselves your family, dragging you shopping just when you've finally got a little money in your pocket – well, your purse!" She giggled a little. "We can do this at your own pace. Please tell me, or any of us, if we're being too overbearing. We want to help **relieve** pressure on you, not add more."

Ranko nodded in understanding and appreciation. "Izzi, that means more to me than you know. My whole life, I've felt like I am trying to live up to everybody else's expectations. I want to live for **me** for a while, and I'm not really sure I know what that looks like." She looked down at her new bag, and the hem of her dress flitting lightly around her legs as she walked. "I've always been terrible at being a girl, and it's made everything so awkward for me. I'm not trying to be a Barbie doll or anything, but I think I **would** like to learn, a little bit. At least, enough that I don't just come off as weird." *If Ranko is here to stay, I need to stop acting like I'm still trying to be a boy.*

Izumi nodded. *Poor thing, having to grow up as a teenage girl without anybody to teach her about makeup, or prepare her for the changes a woman's body goes through at a certain age, or any of that stuff. No wonder she always looks so uncomfortable and nervous.* While all of the girls in their little haphazard clan had been abandoned by their biological families, none so early as Ranko's apparently had. "There's no **wrong** way to be a girl, but I think I get what you mean. I think we can help you out with that, miss Ranko." Izumi smiled disarmingly down at her new young charge.

Ranko blushed furiously. She was adjusting well enough to answering to the name *Ranko*,

but she didn't know that she'd ever get used to being a *miss*. *This was your decision. You chose to let go of your old life so you had room to build a new one, and that's going to be a little uncomfortable for a while*, she coached herself mentally.

Izumi slid herself onto a bench surrounding a little indoor planter, inviting Ranko to join her. "So, why don't you tell me what you think you want to do, and I'll see if I can help?" Ranko looked up at her nervously, and Izumi continued. "Honey, I told you. No judgment. If you want, we don't even have to tell the others anything." Izumi smiled reassuringly, placing her arm around the shorter girl's shoulders again.

Ranko blushed yet again. Even if she did know what she needed - and she doubted she did - she didn't know how she'd ever formulate the words to ask for it. A few short weeks ago, she'd have clobbered anybody who suggested she wear a dress, let alone carry a purse or any of the rest of it. She wondered if she had made a huge mistake. *Am I really ready for all of this?*

She swallowed hard. The only way out was through. "I, *um...*" She bit her bottom lip nervously. "There's just so much. I don't know what's important, or even what I'm not thinking of. I'm sorry. This is so embarrassing. I mean, I essentially grew up... like a *boy*, and I have no idea what the hell I'm doing." If only Izumi knew how literally she meant it. It would be so much easier if Ranko could tell her, *I was a guy until eight months ago*, but that seemed like it wouldn't end well for anybody.

Izumi nodded. "It's okay. What did I tell you about apologizing? Girls learn this stuff one step at a time growing up, and so will you. I've got you, honey. Would it be easier if I made suggestions?"

Ranko nodded emphatically, looking up at her new sister with wide, hopeful eyes. "***Please?***"

"You got it!" Izumi rose to her feet, offering Ranko her hand. "Come on, Cinderella. Let's get you ready for the ball."

Izumi looked her charge over, mentally preparing a to-do list for Ranko's first real foray into feminine presentation. "Okay. Let's start with the basics. I couldn't help but notice that you don't usually wear a bra." She had no doubt that some of the bar's patrons had noticed, too, and she didn't much like the way it made some of them look at her family's new teenage ward. "Do you not *want* to, or do you just not *have* any?"

The redhead hung her head a bit in her embarrassment. "I left home with basically the clothes on my back." It was the most effective way she could think of to say "*why not both?*" without betraying her utter lack of feminine experience. Her eyes were filled with shame, not just at her lack of appropriate undergarments, but also at the destitute state she had been in when Hana and the girls had rescued her from her own brash stupidity.

Izumi gave a sage nod, looking around the mall from the junction between aisles to look for an appropriate store. "Okay. That's easy enough to fix. Do you know your size?"

Ranko shook her head in response, frowning in dismay as if she'd just failed a quiz. "*I've... never had one before.*"

Izumi nodded. *Whoo. Okay. We're really starting from ground zero, huh? Gods, how did this poor girl get through school?* "Okay. That's easy enough to find out. We'll start there! C'mon. There's a store around here I really like for this sort of thing, and the staff is really great. They can give us a hand." She reached down for Ranko's hand, and the tremulous redhead took it cautiously. With a slight tug and a reassuring squeeze, Izumi encouraged her to rise to her feet from the planter she was seated on.

Izumi began leading Ranko toward a nearby shop in the indoor mall. She stepped through the open glass door of a smallish store, leading the young redhead past several racks of dresses and feminine tee shirts to a section that seemed to deal exclusively with women's unmentionables. Everywhere she looked, headless and armless mannequins modeled bras of every style and description, with metal racks hanging from the slatted walls loaded with bras - each containing the same style in a variety of sizes. Here and there, a glossy white display was positioned with a mannequin atop it, its sides loaded with dozens of drawers full of panties to match the bras showcased nearby. The store was immaculately clean and well-lit, with everything classily and tastefully displayed, but Ranko still felt like she was entering a strip club full of landmines.

Ranko's stomach turned. *It's okay, she tried to coax herself in her mind. I'm not being a pervert by looking at this stuff, whatever Akane might say if she saw me right now. I'm a girl now, and girls need this kind of stuff. It ain't like I'm trying to be that old freak and hoarding girly underpants and shit to get off; I just don't want people looking at my tits like there's something wrong with 'em.*

"Okay, what do we do?" Ranko took a deep breath, exhaling slowly as she prepared herself for an adventure.

Izumi smiled softly, trying to will a measure of confidence into her protégé. "Okay, so we need to figure out your size. To do that, we need to get you measured. Normally, the shop

clerks help with that. They'll have you, ya know, pull your boobs out, and they'll take two measurements, one around the middle of 'em and one under them. The under measurement is the number on the size, and the around measurement determines the letter. So, a B70 and a D70 have the same body size, but the D has bigger breasts. Make sense?"

Ranko nodded, swallowing hard as her cheeks warmed. "So, I have to get... *undressed*, then?" Feminine modesty had never really been much of a consideration for her before, but the vulnerability of her new permanent state had given her a new perspective on such things.

Izumi smiled reassuringly, giving her companion's hand a gentle squeeze. "Yep, but they do it in one of those private booths there. You ready?"

Ranko swallowed hard again, her gaze falling on the beige door of the fitting room as if it were the front gate of hell. "As I'm *gonna* be, I guess."

Izumi took her hand and led her to the counter, waving down a twenty-something shop girl who was doing a word search with the tiniest nub of a pencil. "Hello, good afternoon! Can you help us, please? My little sister needs a hand getting her bra measurements."

Ranko waved sheepishly. She didn't know if she'd ever stop blushing at being called anybody's *little sister*, but it certainly hadn't happened yet.

The clerk put her puzzle down, picking up a fabric measuring tape from a drawer behind the counter. "Sure thing! C'mon, hon." She slipped down to her feet from her stool and motioned Ranko toward one of the fitting rooms. Ranko looked back to Izumi as if seeking rescue, but got nothing more than a reassuring smile as Izumi took her new purse from her to hold.

The brown-haired clerk, whose name tag read Taiko, closed and locked the fitting room door behind them after Ranko had timidly entered the little booth. "Alrighty. Let's pull down your dress just a bit, okay?"

Ranko shrank a little tentatively, turning her back to the clerk and starting to slide her arms out of her sleeves. She shivered visibly as it slid down her body, goosebumps forming all over her sensitive skin at the additional exposure to the air conditioning vent directly overhead. Ranko's eyes never left the floor; the last thing she wanted was to look at herself in the full-length mirror mounted to the fitting room wall and watch as a stranger fiddled with her naked bosom.

Taiko reached around her with the measuring tape, tucking it under her breasts and calling out a number. She then wrapped it again, this time around the thickest part of Ranko's bosom. The redhead bit her tongue, shivering as the cold fabric of the measuring tape flicked against her bare nipples. *Keep it together, Cat's Tongue! Fuck!* Ranko was grateful that Izumi had warned her what to expect, or the poor woman might have gotten herself clocked.

"Okay, all done, you can pull your dress back up now, hon." Taiko gave her a gentle pat on her shoulder, and Ranko gratefully complied. "Alright, let's show you what we've got in your size." The clerk opened the stall door and led the diminutive redhead to a wall rack, motioning to a row of wall pegs and three drawers. "These are going to be what you need." Izumi caught up with the pair, taking note of the size Taiko had indicated.

“Thank you!” Ranko managed a smile, despite being both embarrassed and nervous as hell. *Not a pervert. Just a girl. This is normal. At least, it’s supposed to be. Don’t make it weird. They’ll only know it’s weird for me if I let them see it, and if I do, it’ll just embarrass Izumi.*

Taiko walked off to return to her crossword, and Izumi knelt carefully on the floor so she could more easily rummage through the drawers. “Okay. Like the purse, we probably want to start you off with some neutral colors that go with everything.” She withdrew a fairly basic black bra, with a small white bow attached to the bottom band. “Here, this isn’t too over the top.” Digging a little further, she pulled out another, this one a pastel pink with more of a lacy design. “This one’s nice for when you want something a little more **fun**. We can’t be **entirely** practical, now, can we?”

Ranko took them in her trembling hands, and one of the straps popped loose from the pink one just behind the left cup. “**Aww, damn it!** I broke it!”

Izumi looked up and giggled, shaking her head a bit. *The poor thing. She’s terrified, but it’s adorable.* “No, honey, let me show you.” Standing, Izumi took the undergarment from her young charge and unhooked the other end of the strap from the bra. As Ranko watched, she reconnected it by slipping the plastic hook at its end back through a pastel pink fabric loop. “This is so if you’re wearing something where your shoulders aren’t covered, you can wear it without straps. It’s a little less supportive that way, but it’s a necessity for certain outfits.”

Ranko nodded slowly. She couldn’t help but feel like she should be taking notes.

“Let’s see, one more should give you a decent variety to get started. How about this?” Izumi reached back down to the open drawer, handing up a white bra that was identical to the black one, but with the colors inverted. “You’ll want something in light colors so it doesn’t show through when you wear lighter shirts and dresses.”

Ranko gave another bewildered nod. At that moment, she felt that it might be easier to learn how to land a rocket on Mars than to dress properly like a girl.

Izumi flashed the redhead a proud smile, watching her young apprentice process the information she was receiving. “Okay, that sorts that. Do you need bottoms?”

Ranko squinted for a moment, then blushed as she processed what her new *sister* was referring to. *She means **panties**. Girls’ underwear. Oh, fuck.* She’d only worn actual girls’ underthings once or twice. She hid her face behind her hand and bobbed her head slightly, more than a bit humiliated to have to answer Izumi’s question in the affirmative.

The brunette gave an easy smile. “Okay! No problem. Fortunately, bottoms are easier. We know you fit in my clothes,” she said with a wave of her hand over Ranko’s borrowed white dress, “so it’s fair to guess you wear the same size I do. By the way - if you like that dress, you’re welcome to keep it!”

The younger girl’s face all but caught fire. *It’s white. It’s lace and it’s got flowers all over it. I probably look like I’m freaking getting married. But... it’s... it’s comfortable, not too itchy, and...* She glanced at one of the many mirrors dotted throughout the store. *I guess I do look nice in it. And besides, it’s special now - it’s the first thing I ever wore as a **real** girl. On Ranko’s - **my** - first real birthday.* She gave Izumi a sheepish nod and a bright smile, shocking herself with how sincere it felt.

Izumi led Ranko to a wire bin across the narrow aisle, reaching down into it and picking up two transparent plastic bags containing six pairs each of relatively simple cotton panties in assorted colors. "Here, this'll be enough to get you a good start. **Oh!** Almost forgot! One more thing." She walked back over to the bra section, opening a drawer near the ones she had chosen the garments in Ranko's hand from. She drew out a pair of light pink lace panties that were a perfect match for the bra she picked out before, complete with a tiny white bow on the waistband just below where the wearer's navel would be. "Here. For everyday stuff, you can do whatever's clean and comfortable, but when you want to feel extra cute, you've gotta be able to have a matching set." Izumi gave her sister a bright smile.

Ranko could tell Izumi was really enjoying the experience. As for Ranko herself, she was – well, she was *trying* to. She couldn't imagine a scenario where she would care to be **extra cute** in her **underwear**, but thought it better not to push back.

"Do you like this stuff? You don't have to go with things just because I picked them." Izumi smiled reassuringly at her new little sister.

Ranko looked around the racks, trying to see if anything else appealed to her. She still felt dirty just standing in the little shop holding the growing pile of women's unmentionables. The majority of the times she had ever touched a bra or a pair of panties had involved retrieving them from Happosai's hoard for their owners. "I mean, it's new to me, but I'm trying to keep an open mind." Ranko blushed shyly, brushing her hair out of her face.

"Okay. Let's get these checked out, and then you can put something on now - if you want, that is." Izumi took the armful of items back from her companion. Ranko hung back as Izumi darted to the checkout counter, returning in a few moments with a bag and a receipt.

"Okay. Do you want to get changed now, or wait?"

Ranko looked over the pink paper bag with a measure of trepidation. *Izumi did just buy the stuff for me; I'd hate to seem ungrateful.* She reached for the twine handles of the little sack, taking it from Izumi and heading back toward the unlocked fitting room where she'd been measured. Removing her dress with slightly tremulous fingers, she looked at herself in the mirror, wearing nothing but her shoes and her ever-present yellow boxers. She had to admit, the overall look did feel kind of ridiculous.

She looked in the bag, debating what to choose. Her eyes landed on the pink bra. *It wouldn't have been my first choice, she thought to herself, but Izumi is working super hard to cute me up, so I should probably play along.* She slipped off her boxers and pulled the matching pastel panties up over her legs. The slippery slither of the satin, coupled with the slight scratch of the lace trim against her hypersensitive skin, sent another not-unpleasant shiver up her spine.

Now, for the bra. Moment of truth, Ranm... Ranko. She picked up the pink undergarment and wrapped it around herself, reaching behind her back and fumbling for the hooks. *What idiot designed these things to latch in the back where you can't see what you're doing?*

Izumi had just taken a seat in a padded chair outside the fitting room when she heard a loud **thud** against the stall door.

"Dammit!"

Another clumsy **thump** echoed from the rattling door of the stall as Ranko bumped into it again, flailing her arms behind herself in her futile battle with the brassiere.

Izumi stifled a giggle. *It's not nice to laugh at her just because she hasn't had the opportunity to learn these things before*, she mentally admonished herself. "Ranko, honey," she said quietly to avoid embarrassing the poor kid, "... *do you need a hand?*"

A few seconds of silence, followed by another, quieter **thud**, came from the stall. After a few more moments, a defeated voice mumbled from behind the door. "... *yes, please?*"

Izumi heard the door lock unlatch and quickly stepped in, closing and re-locking the door behind her. She could tell from Ranko's face that she was truly mortified to be in her current state, especially in front of another girl. "Hey..." Izumi gently rested her hand on Ranko's left shoulder.

Ranko looked away, down into the corner of the little booth, her face painted with shame.

"Hey!" Izumi's more insistent tone got Ranko's attention, and the redhead's eyes snapped up to hers with a tinge of fear in them. "What did we talk about? There's no need to be embarrassed. Every single girl has struggled with this the first few times. **Every. Last. One.**" She gave Ranko a gentle hug of reassurance, and felt the smaller girl shiver in her arms. Ranko must have been cold, she thought – she definitely could never have fathomed the effect that the Full Body Cat's Tongue pressure point would have on her bare nipples brushing against the faux fur trim of Izumi's coat.

Releasing the slender redhead, Izumi continued. "Can I show you a trick to help?"

Ranko nodded emphatically, her face afire from both her humiliation and the overwhelming physical sensation that had rocketed through her a moment before.

Izumi spun the strap around on the younger girl's body such that the clasps now joined in front of her, just under her breasts. "Look, now we can see what we're working with. Go ahead and clip them on whatever row of hooks is most comfortable." As Ranko complied, she continued. "Great, **now** we can spin it around to the back, and then all we have to do is put our arms through the straps, and **voila!**"

The redhead shook her head – she couldn't believe it was that simple, and she'd made it so complex purely through her intimidation. *I must really look like an idiot right now*. She looked at the full-length mirror in the dressing stall, and she had to admit, Izumi was right. She was, in fact, pretty cute in the matching underwear. *For a real girl, anyway. Which I **totally, really** am*, she reminded herself again.

As Ranko blushed at the sight of her own reflection, Izumi leaned over her shoulder so her face could be seen in the mirror. "Not bad, huh?"

Ranko shook her head, a little shell-shocked.

"C'mon, get dressed! We've got more stops to make." Izumi reached down to the little shelf seat in the booth, handing her companion the white lace dress she'd gifted her.

Ranko threw the dress over her shoulders and pulled it back into place. She checked herself out in the mirror once more, quite surprised at what a difference her new undergarments

made in her shape even through her clothes. She didn't look like a boy in a dress anymore, and she didn't feel like she was cross-dressing like she always had in the past. She was just a *girl*, and a pretty one at that. She adjusted the bow clipped in her hair, which had been knocked slightly askew when she put her dress back on. "Good?"

Izumi looked her over, an approving smile forming on her lips. "You bet. Let's go, *gorgeous*." She stepped out of the stall, carrying the pink paper shopping bag.

Ranko looked down at the floor, where her yellow boxers lay at her feet. She picked them up, looking at them contemplatively for a moment before dropping them into the small pink trash can in the corner of the stall and following Izumi.

“N... *No thank you!*” Ranko glared at the wand in the blonde woman’s hand. “I’m **good!**”

The stylist, a svelte woman in her mid-twenties wearing a green dress and a thick pair of glasses, gave a little *tsk* at the fidgeting girl in her chair. “It’s just a curling iron, for heaven’s sakes! I just want to put a little more wave in it!” She’d already trimmed the split ends and evened out the lengths of the teen’s crimson hair.

Hot! Hot-hot-hot! Get it away! “I’m fine! Really!” The young redhead sat back in the reclining salon chair as far as she could, gripping its armrests with white knuckles and staring at the warm rod as if it were a venomous snake.

“Alright, alright! **Sheesh!**” The stylist shook her head, turning off the curling iron and tossing it to the mauve countertop of her workstation. “I guess you’re done, then.”

Ranko looked down, deep shame in her eyes. “*Thank you. I’m... sorry.*” She slinked out of the chair slowly, removing the black nylon cape from around her neck and leaving it in the seat. She hung her head as Izumi watched her, a combination of concern and intrigue in her eyes as she dug in her purse for her wallet to pay the receptionist of her favorite hair salon.

“Really didn’t want curly hair, huh?” Izumi chuckled as she opened the salon door and led her companion out into the main mall area. “It would probably be pretty cute on you.”

“I just... *like it the way it is, I guess.* I’m sorry if that’s bad.” Ranko’s eyes did not leave her feet as she walked. *She’s trying to do nice stuff for me, and it keeps just being harder than I expected,* she thought with no small measure of disquiet in her eyes. *I feel like a total ingrate and a jerk. I really am doing the best I can, but, like, every single experience today has been new and weird. It has certainly been one of my more interesting birthdays.*

Ranko supposed that her realization made sense, considering it was, technically, Ranko’s **first** birthday. Neither Hana nor Izumi had mentioned the significance of the day, and it felt kind of selfish to Ranko to bring it up herself, so she limited herself to a silent chuckle at the thought. Sipping on the mango smoothie in her hand through a thick straw, she trailed alongside Izumi, wondering where the roller coaster that had become her life would stop next.

“It’s not bad, Ranko. If you like it, you keep it.” Izumi motioned to the array of stores dotting the indoor mall’s center aisle. “See anything that catches your eye?” She watched the redhead analytically as the pair walked down the center aisle of the mall. *She looks so nervous and timid. Poor thing. She eats like she thinks her plate’s gonna be taken from her, she doesn’t know how to react to a gift, and she had to be shown, at her age, how to put on a bra. She’s practically feral. I thought she was gonna freaking bite Sango back at the salon. And yet, she’s so sweet. It’s almost like she’s... afraid to get her hopes up that any of this is real. It’s heartbreaking to watch. Then again, I remember my first few days. I guess sometimes I forget how overwhelming it was at first to have somebody care about you all of a sudden.*

As Ranko shook her head and raised her hand to bring her straw back to her lips, Izumi

looked at it quizzically. “You bite your fingernails, don’t you?”

Ranko nodded, a bit sheepishly. “Didn’t exactly pack a trimmer.” *Shit, that’s bad too? Is there anything about being a girl I do right?!*

Izumi gave her a little *tsk*. “Come here, you, let’s take care of that.” She pulled Ranko into an open stall with several small desks, each with a chair on each side. Rows of small colored vials lined the entire length of the room’s walls, and the whole place smelled of paint thinner.

A very short woman in her late forties, with gray flecks starting to invade her rail-straight black hair, approached the sisters, peering over her thick-rimmed glasses. “Can I help you girls?”

Izumi nudged her companion forward as if to present her for inspection. “My **sister** here is in dire need of some acrylics.”

The redhead turned to face her, confused. “Acrylics? What? You mean, like, spray paint or something?”

Izumi giggled. “Not exactly. Go sit down over there, at one of the desks. I just had my nails done last week, so I’m good. I’ll just chill over here and wait for you. Get whatever you want; this is on me.”

Ranko swallowed hard, following the shop employee to a small white particle board desk. As instructed, Ranko took the seat in front of the desk, leaving the technician to perch on a small, mauve vinyl wheeled stool between the desk and the wall of the little salon.

“Okay, are you ready?” The technician gave a reassuring smile, perhaps sensing the nervousness painted across the birthday girl’s face.

Ranko’s eyes darted around the room as if expecting the thousands of vials on the wire racks lining the walls to rain down her head at any moment and dump acid on her back. She shrugged, an unsure grimace forming in her bared teeth.. “I... **guess?**”

First, the attendant withdrew a small metal tool from a black leather folio on the desk. To Ranko’s eye, it looked like a miniature spear, with a flattened end like a spade. She took Ranko’s right hand gently in her left, and began dragging the tool across the nail of her index finger, pushing the overgrown cuticles back away from the nail itself toward her knuckle. It stung a bit whenever the tool reached the base of her fingers, but Ranko bit her lip and tried not to let it show. *She isn’t acting like she expects it to hurt, so it’s probably just the Cat’s Tongue at work.*

After finishing all ten of the squirming redhead’s cuticles, the woman picked up what looked like a popsicle stick wrapped in sandpaper. Again, she took Ranko’s left hand in her own, and began to drag the stick over her fingernails. She used the grittier side of the emery board to rough up the surface of the nails somewhat, as well as file down some of the larger ridges left from the peeled-back cuticles.

Man, being a girl sure involves letting a lot of people fidget with you, Ranko thought. This is so freaking weird, being fawned over like this.

After repeating the filing process on Ranko’s right hand, the attendant opened a small plastic

package, dumping a small pile of what looked like fingernails out of it onto the glossy white particle board surface. She picked up one of the larger bits and jammed it onto the end of the fingernail on Ranko's left thumb, extending it several centimeters past the end of her finger into a squared-off edge.

How the hell am I supposed to do anything with these? I won't even be able to get my fingers close enough to stuff to freakin' touch it! Ranko opened her mouth to protest, but before she could inhale, the practiced technician had fitted extension tips to most of the other fingers on her left hand. Deciding to be patient for a moment, Ranko watched as the woman collected a small pair of scissors from her folio and began trimming the false fingernails to a more reasonable length and shape.

Oh, thank the gods, Ranko thought as she saw her nails reduced to something she thought she could maintain some shred of manual dexterity in. She did her best not to fidget overmuch as the woman used the emery board to shape the edges of the nail, rounding them until they looked more like the natural shape of a fingertip. As Ranko watched in some combination of embarrassment and morbid curiosity, she repeated the process on the other nine fingers, resulting in what appeared to be a fairly perfect set of feminine fingernails. "Is that it? They just... *stay on* like that?"

The older woman laughed, shaking her head. "No, honey. That's what this stuff is for." She opened a small white jar containing a white powder, and another glass bottle containing a pinkish liquid. With what looked like a small calligraphy brush, she first gathered some of the pink liquid and then dunked the brush into the powder. The combined substances created a viscous white substance that was spread across the whole of Ranko's fingernail. As Ranko watched, the technician applied the thick goo across each of her nails, shaping it until it formed a coat that was slightly thicker in the middle and thinner at the tip and cuticle. It hardened almost instantly, and once it had, the technician used her file on the top of the nails until the seams between Ranko's natural fingernails and the extended tips had entirely disappeared.

"How you doin', hon?" Izumi looked up from the outdated fashion magazine she was reading in the lobby, craning her neck toward her young sister.

"Okay, I guess?" Ranko blushed as an oily chemical of some sort was applied over each of her fingernails. "This stuff smells funny. Will that last?"

Izumi shook her head. "Naaah. It fades after a few minutes."

The diminutive technician began to screw the lids back onto the various containers. "Want to go wash your hands for me in that sink back there, and then pick a color?"

Ranko looked up at the stylist with confusion. "Huh?"

The nail tech motioned to the array of glass bottles lining numerous wire racks along the walls of the salon. "For your nail polish, silly."

Oh. That. Of course. Duh. Ranko blushed at her foolishness, standing and beginning to walk toward the back of the salon, where a white basin sink awaited. Cautiously, she turned the single knob over the faucet, letting the water run for a moment to ensure its temperature had stabilized. She waved her hand near enough to the stream flowing from the faucet to assure herself it was cold, shivering as she finally let her fingers break the surface tension of the

liquid column.

Drying her hands with a white paper towel, Ranko began to walk a lap around the little shop, her eyes scanning the thousands of bottles in rows along both walls. She looked to Izumi, who was still sitting in her chair reading her magazine, for help, but Izumi gave her a smile and a *run along and play* gesture with the back of her hand. Having no idea what she was looking for, or how women normally decided on such a thing, she scanned the rows of small vials several times before eventually settling on a pastel pink bottle that she thought was a pretty good match for her new underthings. *Not that anybody's gonna see those*, she assured herself. It seemed appropriately feminine, but also neutral - at least, less the silver flecks that floated around in the bottle as it moved in her hand - and Izumi had already picked that color for her once. She held it up for her mentor, who nodded approval, and returned it to the stylist who took it from her hand.

Sitting back at the desk, Ranko offered her hand. She smiled nervously at her tormentor. *I feel like a freakin' Barbie doll being messed with like this.*

The stylist went to work uncapping a bottle of thick clear liquid, drawing the thin brush affixed to the inside of the cap out of it. She deftly applied a coat of the clear polish to all ten of Ranko's fingers, resting the brush back in the bottle without screwing the cap back into place. Next, two coats of the pink polish were added. "There, how's that look, sweetheart?" the salon technician asked in a bright tone of voice.

"I thought it would be shinier," Ranko said, looking at the side of the bottle of polish she'd chosen interrogatively.

The elder woman nodded, smiling softly. "Oh, it will be, honey. That's why we put another layer of the clear on." She closed the pink polish, picking up the clear bottle again and withdrawing the brush. In a few moments, she had finished the fourth coat of polish. "Okay. Now we just need to get these dry for you, and you'll be all set."

The redhead winced. "Is that gonna take a long time? It's just that my fr... *sister* is waiting..."

Ranko was led to another seat by the kindly old woman, and instructed to place her hands under an orange lamp. The heat from the lamp on her skin was quite uncomfortable, but bearable, and she squirmed in her chair, looking away from her hands with a pronounced grimace.

"Nah! Just relax for a couple of minutes, and then we'll get you out of here."



"Looks like you're all set, sis! Try to be careful with your fingers for the next hour or so until everything has a chance to fully set. Let me get the doors and stuff."

Ranko blushed for probably the millionth time that day at Izumi's words. *I half-expect to be taught to curtsey like a maid by day's end at this rate. This is fucking ridiculous.*

Izumi checked her watch, seeming a little concerned but not mentioning anything about it to her young companion. "Okay." *Gotta kill about another hour. C'mon, one more thing, one more thing...* She craned her neck, scanning the nearby stores for ideas. "We can probably hold off on too much in the way of clothes for now; it's going to take you a while to figure out what sort of styles you want to branch out into anyway. Shoes? I think you'd be hot as hell in heels, but you probably don't have a lot of practice wearing them."

Ranko smirked confidently, saying nothing. While most elements of femininity eluded her entirely, if she could run at full speed atop a chain link fence, she could probably handle balancing on stilettos, she presumed. She brushed her freshly-styled hair away from the left side of her face, getting it out of the way of her mouth to make way for her straw.

As she did, Izumi's eyes lit up with a realization. "**Got it!** C'mere!" Not taking her hand for fear of mussing her nails, Izumi led her charge to a small store across the mall that was absolutely jam-packed, ceiling to floor, with hair bows and clips, headbands, plastic costume jewelry, and other assorted accessories. Basically everything in the store was pink, covered in sequins, or both. Izumi motioned to a bar-height canvas chair in the corner by the front window. "Sit over there a second."

Aw, hell, she's gonna make me pick out all kinds of hair shit too, isn't she? Ranko blushed yet again as she took the indicated seat, remembering that there was already a white lace bow clipped into her hair. *Something tells me this girl didn't have enough dolls to play with growing up, and she's making up for lost time. And I'm the guinea pig. Just freakin' great.*

A few moments later, Izumi returned with a store employee in tow. The young blonde clerk was wielding a strange-looking object shaped like a gun. *What, she's putting price labels on shit? Izumi, you shouldn't have interrupted her. She's gonna lose her spot and have to start over.*

The teenager, who might have even been a year younger than Ranko, brushed the nervous girl's newly-styled hair to the side with her fingers and smiled. "Oh! Your first time, huh?"

Ranko shrugged. "I... guess so?" She was beginning to worry a little bit. *This seems like a lot of production just to pick out a new bow for my hair. What the heck are you up to, Izzi?*

Her mentor in femininity leaned on the arm of the chair. "Okay, hold still. This is going to sting for a few minutes, but it'll be okay after that, I promise."

Ranko looked up at her with terror in her eyes, gripping the arms of her chair tightly. "What are we going to do?"

Izumi smirked deviously. "You'll see. Trust me."

The employee tore open a little packet, pulling out a folded sheet of paper that smelled like alcohol. She tilted Ranko's head to the side with her hand, beginning to wipe down the bottom of her earlobe with the cloth.

Ranko looked over at the gun on the table, and the realization struck her. *Oh. Oh shit! This is happening? She's gonna... Wait! No-no-no-no...* Her panicked eyes darted up to Izumi, but before she could get out more than an audible gasp, she heard a loud **kachunk** from the surgical steel weapon clamped around her earlobe.

The sudden impalement from the piercing gun felt like she'd been injected with napalm, radiating through her ear, across her face and halfway down her neck. As the throbbing pain spread to every corner of her hypersensitive nerves, she shrieked as if she'd just had her leg torn off, tears welling in her eyes. She clutched the arms of the chair with muscles so tense, she heard the wood frame creaking with the strain over her wails.

The teen wielding the piercing gun chuckled, rolling her eyes at her client's display as she began to reset the device. "Oh, come on, it's not *that* bad. Don't be such a big baby."

Easy for you to say, kid, Ranko thought, glaring hatefully up at her even as she shrank back from the raised piercing gun. *Let's see you last ten minutes with this Cat's Tongue nonsense.*

Izumi squeezed her new sister's hand gently, even as it had yet to release its death grip on the wooden armrest of the folding canvas director's chair. "C'mon, Ranko. You got this. We're halfway done now. Let's go, other side."

I don't want to! It hurts! It hurts so fucking much! She turned her pleading eyes to Izumi. "Do... do we *have* to?"

The brunette chuckled, waving off the redhead's concern with the back of her hand. "Well, I mean, you would look kind of weird having one side done and not the other, don't you think?"

Fuck. She's right. Ranko nodded defeatedly and turned her head, barely believing that she was volunteering herself up to experience the agonizing sensation a second time. *The last thing I want is to look stupid, and now that she's sneak attacked me with this shit, I don't have a lot of choice.*

"Okay, here we go." The girl brought the gun to her ear. "On three, ready? One..." **Kachunk.**

Ranko cried loudly, both in pain and surprise. She nearly jumped out of the chair at the nonplussed blonde. "What the **fuck?!**"

"Sorry. People tell us it's easier when they don't know exactly when it's coming. But, hey, it's all done!" She picked up a small white packet from her tool kit, tearing it open and beginning to unfold an alcohol wipe. "Let me see, so I can get them cleaned? We don't want them getting infected, after all." After a long moment spent angrily glaring at the girl, Ranko acquiesced and tilted her head. The shop girl wiped over both piercing sites with the damp, acrid cloth and pressed a back onto each of the thin metal studs. The young clerk did her best to smile as she handed Ranko a small pink handheld mirror, even though the redhead in her chair glared at her like she was contemplating which display of frilly hair bands and pastel stuffed animals to hide her dismembered body in.

With tears still gently running down her cheek, Ranko pulled her hair back to inspect the damage. As she looked at herself, the hate in her eyes began to give way to... something softer. Her earlobes were an angry red, still reacting to their sudden injury. At the center of each earlobe, a dainty little golden heart now glittered. *Wow. That actually looks...*

"Super cute, huh?" Izumi grinned down at her. "You'll have to keep the starter studs in for a few weeks until your ears heal, but after that we can get you some different ones to play with."

Ranko was more than a little miffed that she hadn't been warned before being... *permanently modified* without her consent, but as she looked at herself in the mirror, she agreed that her feminine face did look more natural with them. While she wasn't sure she would have agreed to brave the gun given the Full-Body Cat's Tongue if she had known what Izumi was planning, she didn't hate it now that it was done. The radiant pain still dominated her senses, but she tried to tune it out. *I don't think she was trying to be mean or anything. I shouldn't be mad at her. She's been trying so hard to help all day.*

Izumi paid the clerk, taking a small packet of information about how to care for a new piercing and slipping it into the bag with Ranko's previously-purchased new undergarments. She checked her watch again, smiling softly. "So, I've got somewhere I've got to be at seven tonight. How do you feel about heading back to the bar?"

Ranko nodded, managing a sincere smile even though her ears still felt like they were on fire from being impaled. "Sure. Hey, thanks again... for everything today." *It's been an adventure, for damn sure.*

The brunette waved off her new young sister's comment with the back of her hand as they walked toward the mall's exit doors. "For the most part, Mama paid; I was just the tour guide." There was a disquiet in her eyes that hadn't been there a few moments before.

Shit. I must've done something else wrong. Tentatively, Ranko reached for Izumi's hand, blushing as she remembered to be careful of her fingernails. "No. Seriously, Izumi. **Thank you.** For your help... and your patience." She smiled, far more genuinely than before. *Hoshi's lucky; from the way Izumi's been looking out for me all day, I bet she's a great mom. A girl could do a hell of a lot worse than to have her as a mentor.*

Izumi's frown faded somewhat, and she released the smaller girl's hand, putting her arm around Ranko's shoulder. She was extremely careful not to get her hand anywhere near the birthday girl's bright-red earlobes. "You're welcome, honey. And you really have been a great sport about all this. I could tell it wasn't easy for you. I'm so proud of you."

Almost fourteen years of martial arts, and Pop's never said that once. It took Izumi less than a week. And all it took was dressing up like a girl.

Ranko caught her reflection in a shop window, stopping for just a moment to admire herself. She couldn't help but smile into her own eyes as she quickly corrected herself.

*All it took was **becoming a woman.***

“Hey, kiddo, whatcha thinkin’?”

Ranko looked up from the train window, blinking herself back into the moment. The Shibuya cityscape zooming by her served as a welcome analogue for how quickly her life seemed to be moving at the moment. At least, unlike the shops and plazas that zipped past her right shoulder, it no longer felt like it was passing her by. “*Huh?* Sorry! I spaced out for a minute there.”

With an easy grin, Izumi gave the smaller girl a nudge with her shoulder. “Yeah, you’ve kinda been off in your own little world since we got on the train. Everything okay?”

The redhead gave a slow nod, turning in her seat to face the girl that had taken to calling herself her *sister*. *One of them*, she corrected herself. *There’s freakin’ three more!* She tried to smile, even though the ends of her ears still felt like they’d been injected with molten plasma. “Yeah, I think so. It’s just... been a crazy couple o’ days, is all. Trying to just digest it all, and it’s a lot.”

“Anything you wanna talk about?” Izumi offered a disarming smile, adjusting in her seat as well. “It stands to reason you’d have a lot going on in your head right now, but you gotta remember, all of us have been where you are, honey, so there’s... we understand, is all I’m trying to say.”

As if, Ranko thought with a sigh. *Bet none of you woke up one morning and said, “hey, today’s a good day to start being a girl,” and then spent all day having strangers messin’ with your tits and shootin’ holes in your face, while everybody’s lookin’ at you like you’re a charity case.* “You guys... sure like doing the whole *talking* thing, don’tcha?”

Izumi nodded softly. “Talking about the things you’re feeling is good. It gives you validation, even if it’s just somebody else saying they understand. Brains are complicated, and they can think a thousand things at once, but your mouth can only *say* one thing at a time, so talking about stuff has this uncanny way of *simplifying* things and quieting the noise in your head a little bit so you can focus and work through stuff. Again, though - it’s not a requirement. There’s no expectation here, Ranko. We want you to process everything at your pace. We want you to feel comfortable.”

Comfortable? What’s that?! Ranko fidgeted in her seat, idly eyeing the sparkly paint covering her fingernails. Perhaps it was psychosomatic, and perhaps it was the Full-Body Cat’s Tongue, but she could have sworn she could *feel* the thick layer of polish lacquered on her nails. *I’m sitting here talking to a stranger who wants to be my sister, and dressed up like a freakin’ Barbie doll.* Every impulse in her mind told her to run, but she couldn’t decide if she wanted to run **from** the new developments in her life, or **toward** them.

“Why do you do it? What makes you guys wanna take a chance on me like this?”

Izumi chuckled quietly under her breath. “Because you’re worth it, honey. Because all of us - even Mama, although she doesn’t like to talk about it - know what it’s like to need somebody else to tell you you’re worth it when you can’t believe it yourself. We all know what it’s like to

have nothing, to doubt everything, and to feel like the demons of the world are waiting around every corner and hiding in every shadow to get you. And, we know, for a hundred percent certain, that there *is* such a thing as coming back from feeling like that, because all of us did it.” She reached to her right, patting the back of Ranko’s hand gently while avoiding her younger sister’s fresh nail polish. “You will too, Ranko. I promise. We’re gonna help you get your feet back under you, no matter what it takes.”

The young redhead shrugged nonchalantly at the elder girl’s words, speaking over the chime indicating the approaching train station. “I just... I ain’t used to people *lookin’ out* for me, *doin’* for me, stuff like that, when there’s nothin’ in it for them. My pop, he was a big one for, ya gotta make your own way in the world, always be ready to up and split, don’t get too attached, that sorta thing.” *Of course, then he grew roots in Mr. Tendo’s guest room, and he doesn’t even have a job. Maybe... She smiled weakly. Maybe it was just one more thing he was full of shit about. It’s amazing how much different all the shit he used to say feels after you get out from under it a little bit and see it from a different perspective.*

She pulled her black crossbody purse - she still couldn’t believe she *owned a freaking purse* - out from between her hip and the armrest of the train seat, wincing a bit as she adjusted in the uncomfortable chair. The skin on the backs of her thighs stuck to the grayish-blue vinyl of the seat under her white lace dress, and it was driving the Cat’s Tongue crazy every time her body made the slightest movement. *Guess it’s just something I’m gonna have to get used to if I ever want to deal with dressing like a girl on the regular*, she mused. “But, ya know, bein’ out on the street like I am, I didn’t really have much of a choice but to say yes and accept all your help, and now I’m just tryin’ to enjoy it while it lasts.”

“Wait, hold up,” Izumi said, raising her left hand in a *stop* gesture. “First things first, you’re **not** out on the street anymore. Ranko, this isn’t like you’re crashing on our couch for a week while you figure things out. You’re *one of us* now, honey, just as much as Mei or Yui are. I know it’s strange and unfamiliar, and that’s okay; we know it’ll take time for you to adjust. But you’ve got to stop looking at this like a day is gonna come where you’re suddenly gonna have to stuff your crap back in that backpack and hit the road. There is no *while it lasts* here. You’re our family now, and family doesn’t come with an expiration date.”

She squeezed Ranko’s hand in her own, offering the younger girl a soft smile of reassurance. “I know it feels surreal. Believe me, I do. When Yui and Aya started calling themselves *Auntie* around Hoshi, I wasn’t sure if I wanted to hug them or hit them at first. I know it can feel almost invasive, like, *who the heck are these people trying to just muscle in and call themselves my family like this?* And, girls like us don’t always have the warmest and fuzziest feelings about family, like, as a *concept*. Burned us too many times, and I get the sneaky suspicion it’s done it to you, too, so I get why you’re a little cagey about it. But, Ranko, I need you to hear me when I tell you this: **you are my sister. I am yours.** It’s a decision we made together, all of us. We think you’re gonna make our family better. Stronger. We aren’t doing this because we want to hold it over you, or because we want some kind of karma boost from somebody. **You** are what’s in it for us, sweetheart.”

“But... *why?* I ain’t exactly all that great.” Ranko looked out the window again, sighing heavily. *All I’ve done is be dishonest with them. At least now, I’m starting to believe some of the things I’ve been telling them.* She bit her lip. *My name is Ranko Tendo. I’m a girl. I’m a waitress.* She glanced tentatively up at Izumi. *I have... sisters.* While she found it at least feasible to comprehend the idea of having *sisters*, probably owing to her time spent among Akane, Nabiki and Kasumi, she was a long way from accepting the idea of Hana as a *mother*, but she decided not to mention that. *Mother is just another way to say “lady who*

ditched your ass at the first opportunity.”

“I mean, I just wandered in off the street. I coulda been an ax murderer or something,” Ranko continued. “And you just stuck me in your guest room without a second thought. Doesn’t seem all that smart.”

Izumi shrugged. “Sometimes, love means ignoring your head and doing what your *heart* tells you, and all of us knew right away when we met you that you belonged with us. You are *one of us*.” She cocked her head to the side, smiling brightly. “You are brave, and tough, and sweet, and kind. You are soft as rose petals and as strong as steel. You, Ranko Tendo, are a *Phoenix* like us, through and through, and we can’t wait to see you *rise*.”

The redhead chuckled darkly at the idea of being reborn as a *phoenix*, when it had been the loss of the *Phoenix Pill* that put her in the position of needing a new identity in the first place. “But, what if I don’t, though?” Ranko sighed, leaning her head on the cold plate glass of the speeding train’s window. “What if I don’t turn out to be what you think I’m gonna? What if I fail at everything? What if I don’t know what I’m doing, and I end up doing the wrong thing? What if, after you get to know me, I’m not what you guys expect? I mean, hell, I feel like I barely know who I am right now.”

Barely knowing might actually be overselling it. Hell, I only decided on my fucking name about nineteen hours ago. I don’t know anything about what I want, or what I like, or...

Izumi leaned over, careful to avoid the angry red splotches around her young charge’s earlobes, and wrapped her arms around Ranko’s shoulders. She gave the smaller girl a gentle squeeze. “Then we’re gonna all be surprised **together**, and we’re all gonna learn to love that girl **together**. Starting with **you**.”

Loving the girl I am? That sure would be something. Ranko looked down and away, trying not to let the girl draped over her back see the reddish tinge beginning to paint her cheeks. *It’s nice to dream, though. It’s been a long fucking time since I’ve felt anything that could remotely be described as **pride**. But... they seem to believe. They believe I’m a girl. They believe I’m worth investing in. They believe I’m...* Her cheeks warmed further, chuckling noiselessly again as she recalled Yui’s mantra from the other night. *I am wanted. I have worth. I have people who care about me.*

The brunette winced a bit as her younger sister’s bright red earlobe caught her eye again. “Does it hurt? Your ears? You reacted a **lot** worse to getting the piercings than most girls do.”

Ranko shrugged, wincing a bit at the callout. “*Yeah, I...*” She sighed, looking down at her hands. *Last thing I want is to let them know how vulnerable I am, but I’m also sick of lying to them. Maybe something in between?* She swallowed hard. “I’m... not so good with the whole pain tolerance thing. *Total wuss*, I guess. But I’ll manage.”

Izumi nodded quietly, an expression of consternation on her face. “I’m really sorry, you know. I should’ve asked you before we did that. It wasn’t cool of me to surprise you with something painful - and permanent - like that. I just...” She chuckled, shaking her head. “Fashion and style are just such a big part of my life, it never even *occurred* to me that there could be such a thing as a girl who **didn’t** want to have her ears pierced. But, I should’ve asked you first, and I apologize.”

Rolling her eyes, Ranko scoffed under her breath. *Right?! Just “sit down, it’ll be fine,” and then... **pow!** Still, if she’d asked, even if I knew how bad it was gonna hurt, I’d probably have said yes. I mean, I didn’t necessarily **want** it - and hell, who knows if it’ll even last if I ever change back - but... she’s right. It’s something that’s normal for girls. So, if I’m gonna be a girl, I should try to do the things normal girls do, even if they’re hard. When in Rome, and all that.*

“It’s okay,” Ranko said after a long, contemplative pause. “Really. You were tryin’ to do something nice. Maybe **warn** a girl first next time, is all, ‘kay?”

Izumi nodded. “I promise. And I really do hope you had fun today.”

Ranko nodded, managing the hint of a smile. “I mean... it was terrifying, and awkward as all hell, and I feel guilty as fuck about you guys spending all that money on me, but... yeah, I guess I did! Other than the whole *punching holes in my head* thing, anyway!” She found herself emitting the slightest of giggles. “It was just, *weird*, ya know? Not really all that used to being the center of attention in a *good* way.”

“Better **get** used to it, kiddo,” Izumi said with a bright grin. “We tend to heap it on the new girls in this family.”

*Well, one thing’s for damn sure: I definitely qualify as a **new girl**,* Ranko thought with a shy smirk as the train screeched to a stop.

As the pair walked up to the glass double doors at the front of the bar, Izumi checked her watch. It read 6:45PM. *Just about perfect*, she thought with a satisfied grin. She deliberately lagged a few steps behind Ranko, walking languidly with a bright smile on her face.

Ranko paused as she slipped past the white A-frame sign reading *Closed for Private Event, Please Come Back Tomorrow* and reached for the door. "Wait, hold up. They're hosting that private party tonight; shouldn't we go through the back door?"

Izumi shook her head with a smile. "I think it'll be okay. They probably won't even notice us come in."

Ranko shrugged, being careful of her fingernails as she reached out for the brass pipe handle of the door. It creaked open a bit into the mostly-empty bar room. The sound system wasn't playing, though. *The hell? Who the heck wants a party with no mus...*

"SURPRISE!"

Her eyes snapped up and scanned the room. There were only a handful of people present, but she recognized most of them - at least, all of the women. There were two men and a little boy she didn't know, presumably Ayako's husband and Izumi's boyfriend and son. A banner hung across the back wall, blaring out **HAPPY BIRTHDAY** in bright red kanji. Ranko turned to Izumi. *"But you said..."*

Izumi giggled with a slight shake of her head. "I said the bar was reserved for a private party for a super-important brat. I stand by my statement." She reached out with her purse dangling from her wrist, poking the smaller girl's nose gently. *"Gotcha."*

Izumi surreptitiously took Ranko's new purse and her shopping bags from her hands, freeing the redhead's arms to accept the incoming hugs from Hana, and then Yui, and finally Mei. Izumi disappeared upstairs for a moment to drop her sister's purchases on the bed and get them out of the way.

Rolling her eyes with a laugh, Ranko stepped deeper into the room. Her face was aflame as she looked around the room in shock. "Oh my gods, you guys! You didn't have to do all of this for me!"

Hana smiled, waving off her comment with the back of her hand. "Nonsense. Every girl deserves a party on her eighteenth birthday. I think it's the law or something. But, look at you! You're positively *glowing*, honey."

Ranko's eyes fell shyly to the floor. She felt almost lightheaded; whether it was elation or the blood rushing to her face, she didn't know, and she wasn't sure she cared. She felt like she could fly.

Yui handed Ranko a Collins glass full of soda, smirking knowingly at her. The bright smile on Ranko's face in the moment, compared to the despair it had worn just a few nights earlier when they'd had the bar to themselves, was night and day, and Yui was glad to see it. As

she looked Ranko over, Yui gasped a little bit. “Did you get your ears pierced?” She brushed Ranko’s hair to the side, examining her sister intently.

The silk of Yui’s yellow sleeve brushing against Ranko’s bare shoulder sent sparks running throughout the redhead’s entire nervous system. Ranko smiled sheepishly, her cheeks turning the same color her still-burning punctured earlobes were. “It was Izumi’s idea. Do you like?”

Yui nodded, an almost wolfish grin creeping across her face. “Hell yeah, I do!”

As Ranko squirmed under Yui’s praise, Mei approached and flashed her sister a wide smile. “Omigosh, your nails are so cute! I freaking **love** that color!” She shook her head to the side, flipping both of her long electric blue pigtails over the shoulder of her black *Ghostbusters* tee shirt.

Ranko could do nothing but beam as the compliments rained down on her from every direction. *Man, either I’m nailing this girl shit, or they’re just trying to make me feel good. Izumi must really know what she’s doing.* She glimpsed her reflection in the mirrored back wall behind the service bar, finding it easy to smile. *Hey, cutie. Look at you. Not too fuckin’ bad for day one.* She giggled to herself, shaking her head and biting her lip as she turned away from the vision in the white dress.

As she leaned over the bar counter and watched her older girls fawn over her youngest, Hana smiled with immense pride. She knew Ranko hadn’t really been in a position to take care of herself for a while, and she could only imagine how wonderful it must feel for her to have had an opportunity to pamper herself a little bit after months of having it rough. Hana herself was more comfortable in worn tee shirts advertising bands from the seventies and liquor brands, jeans and her trademark black leather jacket; indeed, she didn’t even *own* a dress, but she could not deny the glow radiating from her newest ward as she flowed through the bar.

Ayako waved to Ranko when their younger sisters had finally given the birthday girl some room to breathe. “Hey! Happy birthday! C’mere a minute, kiddo.”

Ranko approached, and Ayako gestured to the tallish man to her left, wearing an electric blue polo shirt and black slacks. “Ranko, this is my husband, Kage.”

Ranko bowed respectfully. “It’s my pleasure to meet you, Mr. Jirito.”

Kage returned the bow, but waved off her formality. “Kage is just fine. We’re family, after all! It’s good to meet you, too! Aya’s been telling me all about how you’ve been settling in, although she’s been getting it secondhand from Yui, mostly. Did you have a good time today?”

Ranko blushed again, answering with a sheepish smile and a small nod.

Izumi, having returned from depositing Ranko’s purchases in her room, approached, holding her son on her hip. “Hoshi, baby, this is Ranko.” She smiled brightly. “She’s mama’s new little sister.”

Hoshi waved to her excitedly. The child was probably six, seven years old, wearing a *Spider-man* tee shirt and a pair of blue denim jeans. His rail-straight black hair was styled in a bowl

cut. "Hi, Auntie Ranko!"

The birthday girl's face caught fire again. *Wait, hold up! I'm somebody's aunt? When the hell did that happen?* She sputtered a bit, only just managing to swallow her mouthful of soda before she spat it out. After a few wet coughs, she had recovered enough to respond. "Well, hello, Hoshi. Your mama's told me so much about you. Thank you for being here tonight!"

Another man, on the shorter side, walked up behind Izumi, wrapping his arms around her and Hoshi. He was dressed in a black T-shirt, faded blue jeans and a green cap bearing the logo of a baseball team. "There's my secret agent. It seems your diversion was successful."

Izumi giggled. "Yeah. She had no idea. Ranko, meet my boyfriend, Kaito."

Ranko started to bow, but thought better of it after Kage's reaction. "Hi! It's a pleasure. Izumi can't stop talking about you."

He laughed mirthfully. "Oh boy, I must be in trouble, then." As he spoke, the sound system roared to life, beginning to emit Madonna's *Cherish* at somewhere near its maximum volume.

Izumi bounced Hoshi on her hip, her fingers laced behind his back. "Have you eaten yet, sugar?"

The little boy shook his head. "Gramma said we had to wait until you got here."

His mother nodded. "Well, we're here now, so let's go find us a cookie or something." She bent down and returned him to his feet. He reached up for her hand, and the pair walked toward the bar.

Hoshi smiled up at his mother. "Mama, Auntie Ranko is **really pretty**." His mother grinned back at Ranko, who couldn't decide whether she was humiliated or elated.

After a few more minutes of pleasantries, Ranko joined Izumi at the bar. The countertop was lined with a variety of foodstuffs - far more than they needed for the number of people present. Ranko recognized some of them as the dishes Hana had been preparing that morning. She smiled down at Izumi's son, giving him a little fingertip wave. "How are the cookies?"

He looked up at her with a smile, a bit of chocolate smeared across his face. His mouth still full, he nodded his endorsement emphatically.

"Seems like a pretty good endorsement to me." Ranko giggled, reaching across Izumi's body to take two of the chocolate chip confections and place them on a small paper plate in front of her. She bit into one, giving an exaggerated expression of surprise to the child. "My goodness, you're right! That's got to be the best cookie **ever!**"

Izumi smiled over at her sister. "You're so good with kids." Over Ranko's shoulder, Yui shook her head at Izumi with wide eyes of warning and a grimace on her face, encouraging her to back off the subject of children. Instead, Izumi turned to her boyfriend, beginning to relate the events of the day to him.

As Ranko stuffed half of a cookie in her mouth, Hana walked up behind, taking the bar stool

next to her on her right. “Hey, sweetheart.”

Swiveling on her stool to face the proprietress, Ranko smiled, putting up her index finger in the *one minute* gesture and holding it until she finished chewing. “Hey, Hana! Thank you **so much** for today, and for putting this together. You really didn’t have to, but it means a lot. More than you know. I’ve... never actually *had* a birthday party before.”

The Phoenix clan’s matriarch frowned, her brow furrowing at the thought. *Nobody should grow up like that. That’s just inexcusable.* “Well, you have now, honey.”

Ranko smiled softly, tucking her hair behind her ear. She winced and inhaled sharply through gritted teeth, having brushed her sore earlobe with her as-yet-unfamiliar long fingernails. “You all have made me feel so special since I’ve been here. I thought I was signing up for a waitressing job, and instead I’ve found... *all of this*. I can’t believe how lucky I am to have met you all.”

Hana beamed brightly. “You **are** special, Ranko. I’m sorry it’s taken you so long to learn that about yourself. You deserve a life and a family, and support and love.” The barkeep smiled widely, patting Ranko’s hand. “Oh, that reminds me! Speaking of family, I have something for you.” She pulled her hand back, digging around in the left pocket of her leather jacket.

“*Omigods*, you didn’t have to get me anything! You’ve already done so much!” Ranko exclaimed nervously. “I’ll never be able to repay you as it is!”

Hana pulled her hand back out, hiding whatever was in it under her palm and sliding it across the bar. As Ranko watched with intent curiosity, Hana retracted her arm, revealing a brass key with a red rubber ring around its bow. “Here. This is for you. It opens the front door, the back door in the kitchen, and the emergency exit by the bathrooms.”

The redhead frowned, nodding slowly. *I suppose it makes sense. It’s already been a week, and they’ve already done so much more for me than I had any right to ask...* “I understand. I’ll get my stuff after the party. What time do you want me to start coming in?”

“*Get your...*” Hana shook her head. “Honey, what are you talking about?”

Ranko picked up the key in her left hand, holding it up at shoulder level for emphasis. “I mean, I don’t need a key to open up if I’m sleeping upstairs, so, I’m guessing this means you want me to find someplace else to stay. It’s really okay, honest! You’ve done so much for me already, lettin’ me crash up there all this week, but I knew it wasn’t, like, gonna be permanent or nothin’.”

Hana sputtered, shaking her head emphatically. “Oh, gods, Ranko, **no!** Baby, this is your **home**. I’m giving you a key because you **live here**, and you shouldn’t need to ask somebody to let you in.” She reached out for Ranko’s left wrist, wrapping her fingers firmly around the raised ridge of her scar. “You’re going to stay here as long as you want, and when - and if - you move out, you’ll still be a part of this place forever. You’re **family**, honey! You’re **one of us**, just like Aya, Yui and the rest. The only reason it took this long for me to give you this is ‘cause I had to find a minute to go to the hardware store and have one made for you.”

The redhead rocked back on her stool, a dumbstruck expression falling over her face. *Fuck, they’re... serious about this?* She thought back to Izumi’s comments on the train. *Family doesn’t come with an expiration date. They really...* She looked over the key in her hand as

if it were a magic wand with the power to grant wishes. *The Tendos never even gave me a key. I always had to just climb the wall to get in after dark. Is this really happening?! Did I just get fucking adopted?!* She lowered her head, raising a trembling hand to her eye and brushing away the salty liquid pooling under it. *I'm... not on my own anymore?*

Ranko blushed, biting her lip and nodding slowly in understanding. “Thank you... *Mama Hana.*” The word felt strange coming out of her mouth, but she felt that Hana had earned it, not just for the way she had treated Ranko herself, but for the way the other girls had. She knew that none of them could have been so positive with her if Hana hadn’t first taught them to be positive about themselves – as she was now doing for Ranko.

Hana reached out across the gap between their stools, pulling the teen into her arms and hugging her tight. “You’re so, so welcome, Ranko. We love you.”

Ranko blinked in shock, her face still buried in the shoulder of Hana’s well-oiled leather jacket. *Love? Me?*

The music faded, and there was a thumping over the speakers as Mei tapped the top of the karaoke microphone. “What do you think, everybody? Should we make the birthday girl *sing* for us?”

A chorus of cheers rose from the gathered Phoenix family, and Ranko flushed brightly, releasing Hana and turning on her stool to face the little triangular corner stage. “*Really, Mei?*”

The blue-haired girl nodded. “It’s your birthday. If we can’t applaud you today, when can we? Let’s go. Get your butt up here, girl.”

Ranko shook her head as she dismounted her stool and walked shyly toward the stage. She took the cylindrical microphone from Mei, giving her a playful bonk between her pigtailed with it that reverberated through the speakers. Izumi slid behind the folding table near the Pac-Man machine, scrolling through the available songs on the karaoke machine. She smirked devilishly, selecting a fairly upbeat love song. She’d not heard Ranko sing, though she’d heard amazing things, and she wanted to challenge her a little.

Ranko snickered a bit when the track began to play, but when the lyrics began to light up on the monitor, she laid into the song without hesitation. Unlike her previous “concert” the night before, there was no trepidation on her part. *I can do this. And besides,* she thought with a smile that outshone the sun, *apparently, everyone here is family.*

Ayako clapped over her head in time with the music, swaying in her black pencil skirt and ivory blouse. Kage leaned into her, whispering in her ear without taking his eyes off the stage. “*Holy shit, she’s good.*”

The chorus swelled, and as Ranko began to sing it, a second voice came from the speakers. Mei, holding another dynamic microphone, began singing backup for her, following the lyrics lighting up in pink rather than white at the bottom of the karaoke monitor. Izumi whooped loudly, and Kaito held a laughing Hoshi on his lap, holding his wrists and directing him to clap along with the music. Yui flipped a switch under the bar, and the lights over the stage changed from white to a deep pink. Ranko didn’t know they could *do* that – no performance she had seen on that stage thus far had warranted it.

By the time the third chorus hit, Ranko actually found herself swaying her hips with the music as she sang. It wasn't quite a *dance*, but it felt like one to her. She ended the song with Mei singing as well, face to face with her with only their microphones' lengths separating them. When the song ended, the few people in the room cheered as if there were dozens. Ranko blushed and bowed. "Thank you, everybody!"

Izumi looked up at Mei with wide eyes, a slack jaw, and an excited hand gesture in the redhead's direction.

"I told you," Mei exclaimed into her microphone. **"Now** do you believe me?!"

Izumi put an arm around Ranko's shoulder when she descended from the stage. "They told me you were good, but..." She held her hands to the side of her head, her fingers pursed together and then expanding, in the *"my mind is blown"* gesture.

Ranko flushed a bit. "You guys talk about me like I'm some pop idol or something. I'm just a waitress."

Izumi smirked. "Girl, you keep **that** up, we'll be dolling you up in some idol costumes sooner than you think. Don't worry 'bout a thing, sis. I'm nominating myself as your official stylist."

Ranko blushed deeply, imagining the popular girl groups that all wore harajuku-style maid outfits and mock school uniforms. She didn't think that would **ever** be her style. Then again, not twenty-four hours ago, she'd have called anyone crazy who suggested she'd get her nails done and her ears pierced, and yet, there she was. "Do you **honestly** think I'm that good, or are you just trying to make me feel good? 'Cause if you are, it's workin'..."

Yui walked up, taking a sip of her beer. "You're not as good as we thought. You're **even better** than that."

Ranko smiled proudly to herself. *Maybe - just **maybe** - there's something other than martial arts that I have a little bit of talent with.*

There came another attention-seeking thump on the microphone, and everyone looked up as Hana entered the room from the back, carrying a white-frosted cake with eighteen lit candles. She started singing *Happy Birthday*, and the rest of the family joined in, Mei still crooning it through her karaoke microphone. As the song reached its conclusion, Hana set the cake on the round cherry eight-top table closest to the stage. Its border was lined in pink flowers made of buttercream frosting, and in the middle, "*Happy birthday Ranko*" was written with fuschia icing in a practiced hand.

"Make a wish!" Yui called out.

Ranko blushed. "Honestly, what more could I wish for? Thank you all." She closed her eyes, leaning down and blowing out the candles to the applause of the rest of the partygoers. She was glad to be rid of the fire in her proximity.



After several hours of revelry, food, and even another musical performance from the guest of honor, Ayako and Kage left for home. After saying their goodbyes, the rest of the haphazard family began cleaning up the bar. Hana had insisted that Ranko didn't need to help, but the birthday girl wanted to. It was the least she could do to show her gratitude. She picked up a container of leftover potstickers, carrying it through the saloon door to put it in the walk-in cooler. When she exited into the main kitchen, still shivering from the chill of the refrigerator, Yui was there waiting for her.

"Hey, girl. I didn't want to do this in front of everybody, but I got you something." Yui reached out toward her younger sister and handed Ranko a small green bag with a bow on the front and some white tissue paper poking out of the top.

"Aww, Yui! You didn't have to do that. You've all done so much already!" Still, she took the bag from Yui's hand, pulling out a flat, white, square hinged box about ten centimeters on a side. "What's this?"

She gripped the sides of the box, opening it at the hinges in the back. The bottom of the box was lined in black velvet covering a wide, round peg in the center of the box. Around the peg sat a silver ring, maybe nine centimeters in diameter and six centimeters wide. The exterior was etched with an intricately-carved dragon, with a small blue gemstone set as its eye. It had a small hinge on one side, and a clasp opposite it by the dragon's tail.

Ranko looked at it curiously, and Yui stepped closer. The elder girl took the bauble out of the box, popping open the clasp with her thumb. Gently, she took Ranko's left hand, placing the opened ring around her wrist and pressing it shut with a *click*. The bracelet was a perfect fit around her arm, such that it would not slide up and down on her wrist. Yui turned Ranko's arm over in her hand so that her palm faced upward, and Ranko immediately understood the true intent of the gift - her scar from the encounter with Mousse was now completely hidden, much as Yui's ever-present sleeves did for hers.

Ranko's eyes widened, and so did her smile. "*Yui, it's...*"

"Remember what I told you," Yui interrupted. "Our pasts will never go away, but we can **choose** not to let them mess with the present."

Ranko stepped forward, reaching up and giving Yui a tight hug around her neck. "It's beautiful, Yui. Thank you so much."

Yui squeezed back, sighing happily. "You're welcome, Ran-chan. Happy birthday, kiddo."

Ranko ran between the tables, trying her best to keep on top of her orders and drink deliveries. Even with her and Izumi both serving and even Hana pitching in, there was no way to fully clear the queue of orders and customer requests. The bar was packed so full that she could barely walk between the service bar and the booths. The karaoke machine was in constant use, but with every member of staff far too busy to act as hostess, the singers were forced to select their own songs using the makeshift kiosk that sat on a white plastic folding table near the ladies' room entrance. Even on a Thursday night, the bar was at least twice as busy as the first night she'd worked there - a fact for which Ranko was grateful. If her first few nights had been as hectic as the one she now faced, she might well have quit on the spot.

There seemed to be a buzz in the place, as if the crowd was anticipating something. It was strange - Ranko thought perhaps there was a drink special she didn't know about, because the excitement in the room was far in excess of what the pair of drunk harbor workers performing *Funky Cold Medina* on the bar's tiny corner stage warranted.

Sensing a momentary lull in the action, Ranko slipped through the blue saloon door between the two bar counters, ducking into the back room just to sit down for a few minutes. Mei followed her through the slatted door into the relative quiet of the kitchen. The redhead, wearing a green crushed velvet shirt and a black faux leather miniskirt, slumped heavily onto a metal stool and leaned over the prep counter, resting her elbows on the cold steel surface and holding her head in her hands. She recalled a conversation she had on the train with Izumi on her birthday, about another one of those *rules girls have to know*, remembering to cross her ankles in the short skirt.

"You holding up okay?" Mei asked in a bright tone of voice. There was a knowing smirk on her face that gave Ranko a measure of disquiet. "You're getting your ass kicked out there, new kid."

Ranko looked up at Mei, sighing exhaustedly. "Are we having a sale or something? Did every other bar in town close? What the hell?"

Mei giggled, biting her lip to try and hold it in. "You *really* don't know why we're this busy, do you? You're not just screwing around?"

Ranko shrugged. "National Drink 'Til You Pass Out Day? Seriously, I've got no friggin' idea. What's going on out there?" Her face flushed with exasperation. *For real, what the heck am I walking into, here?*

Mei nodded with a sinister grin. "Okay. Just checking. Enjoy your break!" She turned to walk back to the main bar, waving over her shoulder as she strode down the hallway in her black sneakers.

Ranko called after her. "Hey! Get back here! Aren't you gonna tell me?"

Mei shook her head without turning back to face her younger sister. "Ask your customers!"

After a few precious moments to rest her feet, Ranko headed back out on the main bar floor. *Thank the gods I didn't let Izumi talk me into those high heels she brought. I'd be crying for sure.* She flashed a smile to Izumi, scooping up a tray full of drinks accompanied by a ticket indicating their destination as table nine. "Hey, Izzi? Do **you** know why we're so busy tonight? Mei won't tell me anything, and it's kinda freaking me out a little!" She had a mystified, and only slightly flustered, expression on her face.

"No idea," Izumi said with a shrug, but the mirth in her eyes made it abundantly clear that she was lying.

Ranko could hear her giggling as soon as she turned her back to the bar. *Alright, this shit is getting weird.* She glanced up at Yui, hoping to get the secret out of her, but there was a line five patrons deep at the main bar and Ranko thought better of disrupting her work. Pressing her way through the crowd, she made her way to one of the round six-tops in the center aisle of the bar, and flashed a warm, if nervous, smile to the group of college-age guys. They all appeared to be athletes, most of them wearing the purple and blue colors of the local university. "Okay, boys, I've got four beers, a *Dragonfire*, and an old fashioned." She started distributing the beverages. *Alright, I give up. Time to see what everybody thinks is so funny.* "So, guys, what brings you in tonight? Can't help but notice the place is a little busier than usual for a Thursday night."

The guy that had ordered the old fashioned, a lean and muscular student in a black polo shirt, grinned excitedly. "Word around campus is there's some new girl working here who's an amazing singer. Everybody says she's really **cute**, too! We just had to come check it out for ourselves!"

Never in her life had Ranko wanted to crawl under a table so badly. Her face was nearly the color of her hair. "... *Oh!* And you think most of these folks are here for... **that**, too?"

The young athlete nodded emphatically, wiping his damp lips on his sleeve. "Oh yeah, for sure! I must've heard ten people say they were gonna come tonight to see if she sings."

"I wonder what she looks like," one of his companions, a burly blond with a square jaw, mused.

Another of the young men at the table, a skinny sort with freckles and shock of unkempt, bright orange hair, shrugged his shoulders. "I dunno, but Ehara said she's **hot as hell.**"

Ranko gulped hard, snatching up her cork board serving tray and all but shoving her way across the bar room. Seeking a place to stand where she even had enough room to move her elbows, she slipped behind the service bar counter.

Izumi was waiting for her there, a devilish smirk on her lips. She crossed her arms over her breasts, a bit smugly. "I take it from the look on your face that you get it now?"

Ranko looked at her with shock in her eyes. "*What the hell did you guys do?!* All these people are here for **me?!** Thinking I'm gonna sing again?"

Yui grinned as she flipped her metal cocktail shaker over her shoulder, catching it and slapping it hard onto the top of her mixing glass to create a seal. "And I bet they're gonna **riot** if they don't get what they came for pretty soon, girl."

Ranko covered her face with her hands. **“Seriously?!** What the heck am I gonna do?!”

Mei buzzed up to the counter, placing the three margaritas Izumi had just finished mixing on her tray. “It sounds like you’re gonna have me cover your checks for a few minutes, rockstar.” Before Ranko could even answer her, Mei buzzed back toward table four, dropping off the citrusy cocktails. That done, she pushed her way to the stage, collecting a handheld dynamic microphone which she carried back to the service bar. As Ranko glared, Mei swung the microphone around in her hand tauntingly like a magic wand, as if she were casting a spell over her young sister. “Are you ready?”

Ranko could not stop blushing. She shook her head urgently, her eyes wide. “I can’t just go out there... those people are expecting a **real singer** or something.”

Izumi nodded. “And they’re gonna get one. But first...” She stepped behind Ranko, taking her hair in her gentle and skilled hands. “You’re running around like crazy and you’re sweating. Let’s fix this up a little.” She scooped half of the bright red hair in her hand, pulling a black elastic from her wrist and twisting it around the bundle. Ranko realized it wasn’t how she normally wore her hair right around the time Izumi grabbed the second half of her hair. “Here. That should keep you a little cooler. And ironically, make you a little hotter.”

Ranko spun her head around, her new twin pigtails whipping around behind her. “You’re all enjoying this, aren’t you?” she asked with a glare in her eyes, but a smile on her lips.

Mei snickered. “Who, us?” She flipped the switch on the microphone in her hand, her eyes not leaving Ranko’s face. “So, everybody, we heard you came to hear our little sister sing. Sound about right?” A raucous roar of approval rose from the assembled patrons in the packed bar room.

Ranko sighed in mock exasperation. “Fine, fine, gimme that.” She took the microphone, walking up toward the stage. The crowd parted for her as she made her way to the far corner of the room. Mei and Izumi followed her.

In the back of the bar, the young athlete to whom she had served the old fashioned cocktail stood up, pointing toward the stage. “Holy crap, **that’s our waitress!**”

Mei and Izumi huddled around the karaoke control computer, conspiring for a song to select. *One day*, Ranko promised herself, *I’m actually gonna get to pick my own songs if they’re gonna make me get up here and make an ass out of myself like this.* Izumi pointed to the monitor, and Mei nodded emphatically.

When the music began, Ranko recognized it as the current chart-topping song from a popular idol group. She mouthed a silent *“really?”* at Izumi, who just gave her a smile and a thumbs-up. *Oh well. These people are spending money, and they came for a show. Guess I’m gonna have to give them one.*

Before the lyrics began, Ranko waved to the crowd. “How’s everybody doing tonight?!” A loud **wooooooo** came from the assembled patrons in reply. The lead-in to the first verse ended with four loud thumps of bass, and with each one, Ranko gave a little hop, waving her arms upward to the crowd in order to encourage them to join in. *If you’re all singing, maybe I won’t feel so weird.* When the lyrics began, Ranko leaned forward into the microphone in her hand and began to sing. She also began moving, perfectly matching the choreography that the idol group performed in the song’s music video.

Mei looked at Izumi, baffled. “When the heck did she learn **that?**”

Izzi shrugged, equally surprised, as the pair made their way back behind the bar. “We saw the video on Saturday, on the TVs in the mall food court, but only once...” If only they had known how much time Ranko, in her former life, had spent analyzing and memorizing moves and patterns.

Yui leaned over her two sisters’ shoulders. “Who is this girl, and where did she **come** from? Wasn’t she too scared to get on stage like, less than a week ago?”

Hana, who had stopped her paperwork and emerged from her office to watch the show, gave a satisfied smile. “It’s called **confidence**, and it comes with pride. You girls did that for her.”

Izumi squeezed her sisters close, her eyes not leaving the performance on the tiny little stage.

As the chorus approached, Ranko pointed to a group of well-dressed girls near the front of the stage. “Wanna help me out, ladies?!” The crowd cheered, and she darted to the charging station on a little shelf at the back of the stage, tossing a second microphone down to the quartet. The four girls giggled through the first word or two, before huddling around the mic and singing the backup parts along with the karaoke monitor’s prompting.

By the start of the third verse, the entire bar was on its feet. No one was even ordering drinks for fear of missing anything. For the final chorus, Ranko didn’t sing at all, opting instead to point the microphone to the revelers, who sang it together as a group. She joined in again for the last few notes, bringing the song home with a powerful belt. The crowd went berserk with cheers and applause, and Ranko spun the microphone in her hand like a sai before holstering it in the mic stand and bowing.

It took a full minute and a half for the applause to die down, and Mei’s voice came through the speakers from the hostess microphone behind the bar. “Who wants to sing next?”

No one stood, and Mei heard one woman perched on a barstool ask her date, “Who the hell would want to follow **that?**”

After wiping the sweat from her brow with a bar towel, Ranko picked up her tray and began to make her rounds. Nearly half of her tables asked her to stop and take a picture with their group. There was also more than one request for something a little more intimate than a picture, but Ranko always deflected the more overzealous guys with a coy “*maybe next time, guys?*” She tried to ignore the occasional arm around her back, though one patron got a pretty serious **back off** glare when his hand tried to sneak below her waist.

The young man who had ordered the old fashioned paid for his table’s tab, and when Ranko returned with his credit card receipt, he handed her back the pen. “Miss, would you sign this for me? Please?”

Ranko blushed more deeply than she thought possible. “You mean, like, an **autograph?!**”

He nodded sheepishly. “If it’s not too much trouble?”

She nodded with a stunned smile. “Yeah, sure? You got it, man. What’s your name?” He

gave it as Daijo, and she wrote, “*Daijo, thanks for watching the show! ~ Ranko*” on the receipt. She stared at it for an extra moment before handing it back. It was the first time she had actually written her new name, and it made her smile. Seeing it in her own handwriting, which had generally always been at least a little neater and more feminine in her girlish form, somehow made her new identity just a little more real to her.



When the crowd began to dissipate at night’s end, Ranko sat down on one of the vacant bar stools, pulling the elastics out of her hair and letting it fall loose around her shoulders with a heavy groan. “I gotta tell you, girls, I’m beat.”

Yui nodded sagely. “I don’t blame you. If this keeps up, we’re going to have to hire another waitress, and have you just focus on singing.”

Ranko shook her head. “It’s okay, I can manage.” She really didn’t mind pulling double duty; she felt as if she owed the family no less in recompense for everything they were doing for her.

Izumi put her arms around the redhead’s shoulders. “Not up for being an *idol* just yet, huh?”

Ranko blushed, shrugging as much as she could with Izumi draped over her. “Fake it ‘til you make it, I guess.”

Ranko glanced up at the clock mounted to the small divider separating the employee area behind the service bar from the entertainment area of the bar, where the pool table and Pac-Man machine were. At Yui's suggestion, she'd made it a point not to sing at the same time each night, so that people had to stay - and drink - longer if they wanted to be sure to catch a show. *Alright, it's almost eleven thirty. It's probably about time for another one,* she thought, looking herself over in the mirrored wall behind the service bar.

She was wearing a black velvet choker, a birthday gift from Mei, and the silver dragon bracelet Yui had given her. The latter had not been removed from her wrist other than to bathe since she'd received it. She sported a just-shorter-than-knee-length denim pleated skirt, and Izumi had threaded a length of wide red ribbon through its belt loops and tied it off in a small bow on her left hip. The skirt was paired with an orange blouse with a neckline that revealed a bit more of her chest than she was used to, and Ranko found herself glad of the support her new undergarments gave her shape if it was going to be on display. As with most of her shifts since she'd started performing, the outfit was almost entirely borrowed from Izumi's closet.

"Mmm!" Izumi made an urgent noise around the straw in her mouth to get Ranko's attention, waving to her sister as she swallowed and put her glass of soda down on the wooden bar counter. "C'mere a sec, hon."

Izumi pulled the white ribbon out of her sister's disheveled ponytail, eliciting a blush from the smaller girl made all the worse by Ranko's noticing it in the mirror. "You're running around like a chicken with your head cut off in here tonight, and your hair's getting all messed up." As her right hand teased Ranko's hair loosely with her fingers, she reached into her yellow purse under the bar counter and withdrew a small plastic hairbrush. "Don't worry, little sister. I gotcha covered."

The young redhead squirmed as Izumi corralled her hair back into a tidier ponytail, gritting her teeth a bit as her sister pulled it tight on her scalp and began doubling over a hair elastic around it. *Does she have to pull so hard? Owwww! Doesn't look bad though, I suppose,* Ranko mused, smiling at her reflection as Izumi again tied a large bow around her hair with the length of white satin ribbon she'd removed earlier. She winced slightly at the sight of the golden heart studs decorating her still-sore earlobes. *Crap. Gotta remember to clean those again when I get upstairs,* she admonished herself. *Man, bein' a girl is a lot of freakin' work.*

Every shift since her birthday, she'd tried to perform at least two songs on stage, split apart in order to hit the early and the late crowd. She generally didn't even need to be encouraged anymore; in fact, as her confidence grew, the moments in her shifts where she traded in her order pad for a microphone were fast becoming the highlights of her evenings. Already that night, she'd performed *Diamonds* by Princess Princess - enduring no small amount of Mei's teasing concerning the band name - and *Gloria* by ZIGGY, but the song Mei had selected for her third act of the evening made her nervous. She dared not tell the bar's de facto entertainment manager why. *At least it's pretty simple,* she thought hopefully as she willed herself to stop marveling at her reflection. It wasn't the cute outfit or her newly-restyled hair that kept catching her eye; it was still just so foreign to look in a mirror and see a *smile*.

Picking up her cork board serving tray, she darted between groups of revelers and made her way to table eleven, as she'd noticed their glasses were nearly empty. "Hey, everybody! We still having fun tonight?" The redhead started collecting the depleted glassware, stacking a trio of red plastic baskets that once contained a variety of fried finger foods. "What else can I get you to drink?"

A flurry of requests rose from the six women at the round table, and Ranko jotted everything down on her notepad as quickly as she could with the disposable pen in her left hand. "Okay, I've got some fried pickles, two *Dragonfires*, a whiskey sour, a Manhattan, a lemon drop shot and a Tequila Sunrise. Did I miss anything?" Receiving confirmation that she had not, Ranko smiled proudly at herself. "Alright! I'll get the girls workin' on this for you right away!"

"Hey! Are you going up again soon," one of the women, a brunette in her late thirties, asked through a slightly tipsy slur.

Ranko blushed. Word of mouth had reached a stage where most of the people that regularly patronized the bar knew that the new girl with the red hair was also a fairly talented singer, so she frequently got asked at her tables when she would be performing next. "Just as soon as I drop your order off and make sure nobody else needs anything, actually!" The young server gave a soft smile and a shake of her head as the sound of the woman's excited whooping reached her over her shoulder even from halfway across the room as she delivered the drink order to Izumi.

"Hi! I'm about to hop up on stage for a few minutes," she offered in a chipper voice as she approached table seventeen. "Do any of you need anything before I go? Oh, **hey!**" The redhead smiled brightly at a man she recognized, a shorter gentleman in his late twenties. He wore a gray sport coat over a black tee shirt. "Good to see you, Daijo!"

Her patron blushed deeply, looking down at his drink. "You... *remember my name?!*"

The redhead flushed a bit herself as she picked up an empty glass from in front of one of Daijo's companions. "I mean, how could I forget the person I signed my **very first autograph** for?"

"Can I get one too," one of Daijo's companions, a green-haired woman in her mid-thirties, asked hopefully.

Ranko smiled, nodding. "Sure!" She started to write on her notepad. "And while I'm writing, does anybody else want anything to drink?" The redhead tore the top sheet of her pad off, handing it to the woman.

The patron shook her head in the negative as she read what her server had jotted on the lined green order pad.

Thanks for coming to the Phoenix! I hope you enjoy the show! ~ Ranko

Having received confirmation from each of the table's three other occupants that nothing further was required, she grinned brightly over her shoulder and sped away from the table on her way to the next.

Ranko cheerily greeted each of her remaining tables in turn, finding that they too needed

little other than the occasional clearing of an empty glass. Craning her neck, she confirmed that both of the brutishly large men at table six had full glasses, and she was glad of it. They had been quite rude to her since they came in, and Ranko didn't relish speaking to them again. *Not to mention, kind of a dick move taking up an eight-top table for just two people on a busy night*, she thought.

As Ranko piled a load of empty glasses into the dishwasher behind the main bar counter, Mei emerged from the kitchen, wiping the sweat from her brow on the sleeve of her blue peasant shirt. "Hey, sis! You about ready to **do this thing?**"

Ranko smiled brightly, as she seemed to whenever one of the bar's other employees referred to her as their *sister*. "You bet! Mind helping me get set up?"

"Let's do it," Mei said, bounding out to join her younger sister in the main bar area and heading toward the stage. As soon as Ranko took a step onto the little triangular platform in the corner by the ladies' room, the din in the bar seemed to order itself into an anticipatory murmur. That, in turn, devolved into a raucous cheer as Mei turned up the volume of the twelve speakers comprising the bar's aging sound system, and a drum beat began playing through it without any other accompaniment.

The American song had been popular a few years back, though Ranko had only recently heard it for the first time. She switched on the microphone in her hand, swaying on the little stage in a pair of white sneakers she'd picked out during her birthday shopping trip with Izumi. *Stupid music video just has a dude sitting in a chair with a guitar the whole time, so not much to work with on a dance. Not that there's much room to do a lot of that up here anyway.*

"*I got my mind **set on you**,*" Ranko sang, smiling brightly as the crowd quieted to listen. "*I got my mind **set on you!***" As was becoming commonplace to the young songstress, the crowd was enthusiastic to cheer and sing along, with the exception of the two sour guys in the back.

"*Is it me,*" Hana asked, leaning on the archway dividing the back of house from the bar area in her trademark black leather jacket and smirking at Yui. "Or, does she look like she's starting to **enjoy** being up there?"

Yui laughed, running the soda gun over a pair of cocktails to top them off with club soda. "Who, Little Miss Timid? Perish the thought."

"*But it's gonna take money! A **whole lotta** spendin' money! It's gonna take plenty o' money, to do it right, child,*" Ranko sang, shrugging as the sound escaped her lips.

I don't have the slightest idea what the hell I'm talking about up here, she thought as she danced in place for the crowd, *but they're eating it up. So, there's that.*

As the repetitive song neared its completion, Izumi bopped along with the beat behind the service bar as she vigorously shook a margarita over her shoulder in her cocktail tin. *The energy in here is so much different since she started singing*, she thought with a contented smile.

"**Set on you!**"

Ranko bowed as the song ended, beaming at the adulation of some two hundred and change bargoers. "Thanks everybody! Give me just a second, and I'll be around to check on your tables!" She hopped down from the stage, blushing furiously as she thrust her hand down past her waist. *Shit! I gotta be careful doing that kinda shit in a skirt! Stupid, Ranko! Stupid!*

Her cheeks still warm, she began darting between her tables, jotting orders for drinks down on the left notepad she withdrew from the pocket of her skirt. Giggling, she threw up two fingers, crouching between two college-aged girls as a Polaroid camera was aimed by a third.

Mei had set the music system back to random play mode, and it was currently blasting a popular new song in which some guy randomly read off a whole bunch of random names and stuff. *Einstein, James Dean, Brooklyn's got a winning team? Whatever the shit that's supposed to mean*, the redhead mused as she worked.

Ranko's smile faded somewhat as she noted that the men at table six had finished their drinks. Fortunately, only one of them was currently seated, so there was only half the potential for rudeness. *Gotta put on a smile*, she resolved. *Customer service girl, go! We can do this. It's part of the job*. Approaching the table, she leaned down to shout over the nonsensical music. "Hey there! Can I get you or your friend anything else?"

The customer, a giant of a man with a stubbly chin and a flat-top haircut, glared up at the young server. He smelled of garlic and body odor, and wore a camouflage tank top despite the early December chill in the air outside. "Took you long enough."

The redhead sighed, her smile deflating. "Yeah, I'm sorry about that! Down side of me singing *and* waiting tables. But I'm here now, and I'll be happy to get you whatever you need."

The massive man glowered hungrily up at her from his seat. "In that case, sure! I'll take a kiss."

Ranko shook her head, a disgusted expression crossing her face. It wasn't the first time she'd heard such a suggestion from a patron, or even from random strangers on the street before discovering the Phoenix, but something about the brute's overall presence made Ranko's skin crawl all the more at the thought. Still, she tried to deflect his advance as she usually did in such circumstances, forcing herself to recover a false smile. "Um, maybe next time?"

"Woooo! Ranko! Great job tonight!"

Ranko turned her eyes from the seated man at the sound of her name, flashing a smile and a wave at the girls from table eleven as they made their way to the exit. "Have a good *nurk...*"

With her focus turned away from the unruly patron, she had not noticed his hand firing upward. He wrapped his meaty fingers around Ranko's choker, twisting it at the base of her throat and cutting off her airflow. "No, how about ***now?***" As she reached for his wrist, he extended his arm to its full length, locking his elbow at its maximum extension.

She gasped, knocking her tray full of glasses from the tabletop. It fell to the hardwood floor

with a loud *crash* that pierced the fourth chorus of *We Didn't Start the Fire*. Several shrieks rose from various corners of the bar as the patrons became aware of the confrontation.

Ranko flailed, striking downward at his forearm with her fists to try and disengage it from her necklace, but his muscular bicep would not yield. She swung wildly for his face, finding that her shorter arms lacked the reach required for her punch to connect.

Her assailant stood, dragging Ranko by the neck as he did. "Yeah, I heard about you and what you did to my friends the other day. Not so tough now, *are you, bitch?!*" He grabbed at her shirt with his left hand, tearing it partially open at the neckline. The crowd began to stampede away from the altercation for safety, a cacophony of screams rising from the panicked bargoers.

Ranko thought she heard Mei scream her name at the periphery of her consciousness, which was beginning to fade as her oxygen supply diminished. *Gotta... get...*

She swung desperately for her attacker's face again, but as she did, his companion crashed into her from behind. The second man restrained her left arm at her side, but his momentum knocked her forward far enough that she could reach her assailant with her right. Seizing the opportunity, she threw a punch at the thug's face with lightning speed. Her fist connected, and the ogreish patron lost his grip on her necklace, staggering back against the table.

Ranko coughed and sputtered, trying to orient herself through her dizziness as she hungrily gasped for air. *C'mon, Ranko! Get back in the fight!* She spun around, whipping her leg around at eye level and catching the second assailant in the chest with a crescent kick. He fell, and as he did, Ranko stumbled a bit, her equilibrium having not yet recovered from the lack of oxygen.

"Get off of her!" Izumi yelled desperately. She tried to push through the crowd, but the stampede for the exit afforded her no gap to make her way closer to the conflict. **"Let her GO!"**

The redhead whirled to face her first opponent, but her timing could not have been worse. By the time her eyes reoriented, his strike had almost reached its target. She tried to sidestep his swing, but as the room was still spinning, she misjudged the distance and did not move quite far enough. The back of his hand struck her square across her cheek with a loud **smack**.

"MOVE!" Yui screeched at a trio of women who had pressed up against the bar counter for safety. Yelping at the scream from behind them, the frightened office workers darted clear toward the front door of the building.

Ranko staggered back a step, her face exploding in pain. As she did, her back foot slipped in a puddle formed by the half-empty cocktails and mostly-melted ice that had spilled from her serving tray onto the wooden floor. Her leg skidded out from under her, and she fell backward toward the bar counter. With a loud **thud**, the back of her head struck the edge of the counter, less than a meter from where Yui had been blending a daiquiri not moments before. Her body continued to fall between two vacant bar stools, and there came a hollow ringing of metal that reverberated through her skull as her temple made contact with the brass foot rail at the bottom of the bar.

The young waitress looked up with bleary eyes at her attacker's face as he approached. In

the space between consciousness and oblivion, her nightmares flooded into her mind accompanied by the ringing bells in her skull. *It's just like Mikado*, she thought, desperately grasping in her mind to reassert her grip on the present. *He's gonna...*

She thought she heard what sounded like television static, and caught a glimpse of white smoke, but before she could identify the source of either, the world faded to black.

With a pained groan, Ranko sat up. Her head was throbbing something fierce, and she wasn't quite sure where she was. Blinking the blurriness from her eyes, she slowly began to recognize the bedroom that comprised nearly all of her little apartment above the bar. She rubbed her temples, wincing and retreating from the touch of her own fingers. "*What the...?*" She heard glass strike glass, turning her body in her bed to face the source of the sound.

Seated in one of the wooden dining chairs that had been pulled closer to the bed, Hana perked up as Ranko stirred. Her half-full bottle of beer rested on the small white nightstand next to three empty ones, and her leather jacket lay draped over the back of the other dinette chair. "*Shhh. Take it easy, baby. Slowly.*" Hana stood, closing the half-meter gap and sitting on the edge of the bed to Ranko's right.

Ranko blinked up at her in the darkened apartment. Her eyes didn't seem to be working quite right, and there was a constant *hum* reverberating in the back of her skull. She felt like she was on a boat, because the bed seemed to slosh around whenever she moved her head. "*What happened?*"

Hana frowned, gently brushing Ranko's unruly red hair from her eyes with her fingers. "There was a fight in the bar."

Ranko groggily revisited the various flashes in her mind, working to separate dream from memory. *I sang that weird song... and then there was a guy, and he grabbed my necklace. And he hit me, and then... smoke?*

"*I... I think I remember.*"

She lifted the covers and looked herself over. Her body seemed mostly intact. She was absolutely swimming in a gray tee shirt with the logo for Jim Beam screen printed across her chest. For as oversized as it was on her, it had to have belonged to Hana. Besides the shirt, she wore only the pair of green cotton panties she'd had on the night of the attack. *Why didn't they just bring me up here in what I was wearing?* She remembered with horror that her assailant had torn her shirt with a visible cringe, first at the realization that the garment had been borrowed from Izumi, but then at a much more fearsome thought. *What... else did he do to me? Did he... oh, gods, how do I... Those guys weren't even martial artists, and they just... two seconds of being caught off guard, and... fuck! How could I let this happen to me?! What do I do now?*

Reading the terror in her young charge's eyes, Hana spoke up in a soft, soothing voice. "You're all right, honey. Yui and I changed you out of your clothes when we brought you upstairs."

The redhead's cheeks warmed, and she averted her eyes from the bar's proprietress and matriarch. While it had never much bothered her in her former life, since accepting herself as a girl, she had begun to feel far more protective of her body. The idea that two members of the haphazard clan of wayward women had seen her nearly nude, especially while she was unconscious, was a lot for her to take in.

Ranko swiveled her legs off of the bed on the side opposite Hana, standing and turning toward the bathroom. She made it one step before her body careened uncontrollably to the right side and she collapsed to the floor in a heap.

“Ranko!” Hana rushed around to the other side of the bed, picking her up off the floor and sitting her back in the bed with a surprising amount of ease. “You need to take it easy, sweetheart. The doctor said you’ll be alright, but you got your bell rung pretty good. Stay put for now if you can. I’ll get you whatever you need.”

Ranko blinked slowly, rubbing her throbbing temples. “Doctor? I... don’t *remember*.”

Hana nodded. “There was a doctor in the bar with his date and a few friends. He checked you over before we ever even got you up off the floor.”

The apartment door flung open with a bang and a crash, and Yui burst into the small room. “I heard a loud noise, is she... **Ranko!** You’re **awake!**”

Ranko winced, covering her ears and recoiling from the sound. Every noise reverberated in her skull like a gong being thrown into traffic. “*Hey, Yui.*” She let her head fall gently back to her pillow, covering her eyes with her forearm. The afternoon sunlight from her lone window seemed awfully bright today for some reason, and it hurt to look at. “*Please don’t yell,*” she pleaded.

“*Shit, sorry, sis.*” Yui kicked off her chunky black heels, both to respect her sister’s home and to minimize the sound of her footfalls, and stepped closer to the edge of the bed on her bare feet. “How you feelin’, kiddo?”

“*Like I got hit by a dump truck full of shrine bells,*” the redhead lamented with a pitiful groan. “For a second, I thought those guys were going to kill me... *or worse.* Why did they stop?”

Yui opened her mouth to answer, but Hana hushed her with a quick hand on her forearm. “Don’t worry about that,” Hana replied. “You’re safe now, and that’s all that matters.”

Ranko started to sit up again, and Hana made a scolding noise, clicking her tongue. “*Uh-uh,* young lady. I told you, you need to stay in bed.”

Too groggy to be embarrassed at being called a *lady*, Ranko could only groan. “I really gotta pee, though.”

Yui walked around to the right side of the bed, offering her forearm down to her sister. “Come on, I’ll walk with you.”

Ranko swiveled her legs around, hanging them off the bed and sliding her backside off the mattress. Clinging tightly to Yui’s arm, she wobbled forward, leaning on her sister until she made it into the narrow bathroom. “I can use the counter from here. Thanks.”

She shimmied carefully to the toilet, taking care of her business and standing again, putting the majority of her weight on the periwinkle blue countertop. As she passed the mirror, she stopped to look at herself. There was a large purple splotch on her cheek, and an angry red stripe around her neck from where the choker had cut off her airflow. Both were fading, no doubt due to the amount of time she’d spent unconscious. *Aw, man, again with the bruises? Guess I’m gonna be stuck wearin’ makeup again. Fuck, that shit feels weird on my face.*

Stupid Cat's Tongue. She opened the bathroom door, and Yui immediately reached out to brace her again.

Yui took slow, cautious steps, only one to every two of her sister's unsteady minces, as she led Ranko back to the bed. "Is there anything else you need, sis?"

Ranko blinked up at her. "Aspirin? Like, **all of it?**"

Yui smiled faintly. "I think we can manage that." She scooted off to the kitchenette, starting to fill a square juice glass with water from the sink.

"I thought I saw smoke. White smoke. Just before I blacked out." Ranko rubbed her temples again, leaning her head back against the white headboard. She winced, inhaling sharply through gritted teeth as her head made a quiet *bong* sound against the hollow aluminum frame.

Hana shook her head. "No, honey. It must have been the concussion." She turned in her chair, flashing Yui a look that, had Ranko seen it, she would have clearly recognized as a wordless *go with me on this*. She stretched her arms toward the ceiling, vocalizing through a loud yawn.

"Ma, why don't you let me take a shift with her? You've been up here all night. You need your rest, too." Yui sighed, shaking her head in her mother's direction. Her facial expression was one of disappointment, even though both women knew there had never really been any other expectation when one of their number needed help.

She... watched over me... all night? Ranko blinked, looking over the woman in the chair to her right with her mouth hanging open. *She really cares... that much?*

Hana waved the offer off with a flick of her wrist. "Nah, I'm good. You and your sisters need to get the bar ready for tonight. I've got a few more hours in me yet."

After rummaging in one of the drawers in the tiny corner kitchen, Yui walked to the bed and handed her young sister four round white pills. She leaned over, helping to support the glass of water in Ranko's hand until she could swallow them and then setting the rest of the water on the nightstand nearest to Hana's chair. "Alright, then. If you insist, I'm gonna get back downstairs and help them finish prep. Izzi and Mei will want to know she's awake. Should I send them up?"

Hana shook her head, not giving Ranko a chance to answer. "She needs rest. We all want to see her, but let's put her needs first for now."

Yui nodded. "Of course, Mama." She grabbed her shoes from the floor and exited the apartment, closing the door carefully to minimize the sound.

Hana moved back over to the bed, sitting next to Ranko gingerly. She began gently stroking Ranko's hair, careful to avoid both the lumps where her head had struck the bar, and her recently-pierced earlobes.

"*Mm.* That feels nice, Mama." Ranko still couldn't believe that she was using that term for *anyone*, but at the moment, she gave herself permission to do so on the basis that she was feeling pretty pathetic. "I'm sorry I lost the fight."

I gotta find a place to start training again. Losing to those jerkwads, that's just... unacceptable.

Hana gave her a little *tsk*. "Don't you dare apologize, Ranko. Don't you **dare**. Just, you rest."

The redhead sighed softly, her shoulders slumping a bit against the headboard. "I just, after the thing with Mei, you all made it sound like it's kinda my job to keep the riff-raff out, and... they messed up the whole night."

"Honestly, Ranko," Hana said, shaking her head with a furrowed brow and pursed lips, "do you **really** think I'm more worried about an hour of lost drink sales than I am the safety of **my girls?**"

Ranko rolled over slightly, sitting on her hip and looking up at her caretaker. "Mama, why do you do it? Look after us all like you do?"

Hana smiled, sighing a little distantly. "It's a long story, baby."

The teen tried her best to smile. "I ain't going anywhere."

Hana looked at her young ward contemplatively for a long few moments. "The thing is, I've never talked about it with anyone before."

Ranko looked up at her with a goofy grin, her eyes not exactly pointing in the same direction. "Lucky for you, I'm pretty sure I'm not gonna remember this conversation tomorrow either way. C'mon. You listen to us talk about stuff all the time."

Hana chuckled, pausing for another long moment before answering. "Fair enough, I suppose, but if you do remember, it stays between us. None of your sisters even know."

Ranko nodded as gently as she could, her head still not especially fond of moving.

"Well, when I was... well, not much older than you, I guess, I started working here. Back then, the bar was called the *Bottle and Brew*, and it was owned by this nice old guy named Ito. I had my own challenges, not unlike some of you girls, and Ito looked out for me like I was his own. He taught me everything he could about the industry, and I was hungry to absorb all of it; I knew within six months of working here that I wanted to own my own bar.

"Problem was, I was something of a wild thing. I got in the bad habit of taking guys home from the bar after my shift, and one thing led to another, and I ended up getting pregnant way before I was ready to. Luckily, my parents didn't disown me like Izumi's did, but it was pretty obvious that I wasn't going to be able to take care of a baby on my own. It was the hardest thing I ever had to do, but I put my daughter up for adoption.

"Some sixteen years later, Ito was talking about retiring, and about that time, my father died. He left me a little bit of money – not anything crazy, but enough that I was able to buy the bar. That would've been... oh, '74. In truth, Ito all but gave it to me; I didn't pay half what it was worth, but it was enough that he could afford to retire on. Within a few months of owning the place, I was doing a little better for myself, and I thought I might try to find my daughter and see what happened to her.

"When I originally put her up for adoption, they gave me the name of the family, and when I

looked them up, I was surprised to find out that they lived just a few blocks from here. I gave some cheerleader a couple hundred yen to borrow her yearbook, and I was able to see a picture of her for the first time. And, surprisingly, it turned out that I recognized her. She used to walk by the bar every day on her way to and from school, and I'd seen her more than a few times. She always looked so sad and distant, and it broke my heart even before I knew who she was.

"For months, I waited for her to walk by every afternoon during prep, trying to find the courage to go talk to her. I followed her a couple of times, being entirely too chickenshit to go introduce myself, and learned that she liked this little cafe that used to be down on the corner. She'd go there on Thursdays with some friends. It's gone now. Anyway, I finally decided I would try to meet her there and introduce myself.

"I got all dressed up..." She chuckled, shaking her head. "Last time I actually wore a fuckin' **dress**, come to think of it. I opened the front door, and as soon as I did, she came running out of a little anime shop across the street, in the plaza over there where that martial arts studio is. I saw that she was being chased by a couple of guys - police, it turns out. I didn't even think. I just grabbed her arm and yanked her inside, and hid her up here from them. She'd apparently stolen a couple of wall scrolls or something, but I didn't care. For the first time in her life, I was able to protect my little girl."

Ranko blinked. The story was starting to sound familiar. "Wait a minute... are we talking about **Ayako?!?**"

Hana nodded. "We sat and talked, and I asked her about her family. She said she was unhappy with her adopted family, and I could tell she was basically acting out to get attention. I offered her a job and told her she could stay here. I didn't really need the help, and she couldn't even work nights at her age, but I was so happy that she decided to stay with me." She sighed remorsefully. "To this day, I still haven't told her the truth."

Ranko nodded slowly. "So, you didn't **set out** to take in girls like us." Another phrase that felt strange crossing her lips. "But then Ayako found Yui out back."

Hana smiled. *I'm glad that Yui had confided that story in her. She doesn't share it with many people, and it means they're getting close.* "Exactly. And I couldn't turn her away - and even if I'd wanted to, I couldn't explain to Ayako why I'd take in one teenage girl I'd just met and not another, so Yui stayed. And then in time, Yui found Izumi, and Izumi found Mei."

Ranko cracked a little smile. "And that means, **I'm** the only one you actually ever chose *all by yourself.*"

Hana laughed a little. "I suppose you are, but if you ask me, you were more of a team effort. We all talked about it, and we unanimously decided as a family before we invited you to stay."

Ranko purred quietly into Hana's gentle brushing of her hair, listing to her right and leaning her head on the tall woman's shoulder. *"I'm so glad you did."*

Hana leaned down, brushing away the bright-red bangs and giving Ranko a gentle kiss on her forehead. "So am I, baby girl. **So am I.**"

With her hand lightly maintaining contact with the wall, Ranko completed a third tentative lap around her studio apartment. Finally, she could walk well enough that she felt confident enough to brave the stairs. The night before had been the first time she'd been alone since being attacked in the bar three days prior. She'd finally managed to convince Mei to go home a little after four in the morning so she could get some sleep. Ranko loved Mei to death, but *boy*, that girl could talk up a storm.

She pulled on her gi pants and an oversized pink T-shirt bearing the logo of one of the many idol groups she'd started to cover in her singing, slipping on her black shoes. Standing from the edge of her bed, she walked carefully to the apartment door into the small landing area and gingerly made her way down the steps to the back room of the bar below.

"Hello? Anybody here? Mama?" Ranko turned right into the kitchen, looking for Hana or any of her sisters and finding that she was alone. *Maybe up front?* She traversed the narrow hallway toward the public area of the bar, but as she passed Hana's office, she found the door uncharacteristically ajar. She stepped into the cluttered room, checking to see if anyone was present and finding no one.

The cramped space looked as if it hadn't been cleaned in a year. Piles of paperwork nearly a half-meter high in places, including dozens of envelopes that had never been opened, dominated the cheap particle board desk and the side table in the corner to its right. Behind the desk, a ratty black office chair with strips of criss-crossed duct tape covering the worst of the rips in the seat cushion awaited an occupant. To the left of the desk, a small gray plastic waste bin overflowed with empty beer bottles. A small orange terracotta planter hung from the ceiling in the corner behind the door; it might have been pretty once, but the succulent that had occupied it was long dead. The reddish carpet was almost brown with ground-in dirt from years of traffic in work shoes. The right wall was dominated by a blood-red leather couch, cracked and worn all over to the point that the seats were more likely mottled in different colors than the cows the material had come from.

A rusty beige metal filing cabinet stood against the left wall, just in front of the desk, with a combination television and VCR atop it. As she turned to leave the room, she noticed a stack of video cassettes piled to the left of the monitor. Each had a date written on the label in Hana's handwriting. She hadn't paid much attention to it before, but Hana had once told her that there were security cameras throughout the bar that recorded everything.

She tried to will herself to walk out of the room, but she could not. *I have to know what happened. Hana told me not to worry about it, but I can't get it out of my head.*

Ranko rifled through the tapes, finding the one with Wednesday's date and popping it into the slot underneath the black-and-white security monitor. She shifted aside some of the clutter that buried the ragged red leather couch along the back wall, sitting down. After searching between the couch cushions for a small black plastic remote control, she pressed the double-forward arrow on it. Scanning the four small pictures in the corners, she identified the lower-left quadrant as the camera most likely to show the assault. She stared intently, barely blinking as the evening zoomed past her eyes at sixteen times normal speed. Steeling her nerves as she saw herself lean over table six, she swallowed hard and pressed **play**. It

took three pushes of the button before the monitor responded, owing to the failing batteries in the remote control.

There was no audio in the recording, but Ranko heard the events in her mind as they replayed in front of her eyes. The shrieks of the crowd. Mei screaming her name. She watched as her assailant grabbed her necklace. In one of the other quadrants of the screen, the second attacker closed on the table from the direction of the men's room, shoving a young woman in his path to the floor in his hurry to help his friend.

Ranko winced as the man in the video tore Izumi's shirt at her neckline. *At least my boobs weren't hanging out*, she thought with a sigh of relief. She recoiled at the image of herself being struck in the face. Her shame wasn't just at the thought that she'd been hit, but that the guy had actually *slapped* her with an open hand, like... well, *like a girl*. Ranko watched as her form staggered back and crashed into the bartop. Both of her attackers leered over her, and the rest of the patrons in the bar, who had given the altercation a wide berth, continued to make their way to the front door. Some had even used the fire exit in the back between the bathrooms.

And then, there it was: a flash of white smoke. "I *knew* I saw it!" she exclaimed aloud. She traced the smoke back to its source, and found Hana's image, standing behind the bar, discharging a fire extinguisher into the eyes of the two huge men. They both recoiled, and lights began to flash through the windows; Ranko correctly guessed it would be the police.

As the brutes backed away and the bar patrons continued running for the exits, Yui vaulted over the bar top, kneeling over Ranko. She lifted Ranko's head in her arms and cradled it gently, bending herself over Ranko's unconscious form. As the crowd stampeded past, Yui shielded Ranko's body with her own and ensured no one stepped on her as they made their escape. She caught glimpses of Mei and Izumi darting through the crowd, Mei finally dragging someone back toward Ranko by the hand. *That must have been the doctor*, she thought. The man turned his head to face the camera, and she smiled weakly in recognition of Daijo, the nice middle-aged man she'd signed her first autograph for a little more than a week ago.

A tear ran down her cheek as the rest of the encounter played out. She couldn't believe what she had seen. Four women, none of whom had a lick of training in martial arts or self-defense of any kind as far as she knew, had stood up for her. They stood no chance to win a fight with the brutes, but they had defended her anyway. Protected her. **Saved** her. Ranko wasn't especially used to being the one on the receiving end of such actions.

She saw a policeman walk by the window in the recording, leading the man that had slapped her in handcuffs. She kept watching, waiting to see what happened to the other man, but before he appeared in any of the four quadrants of the monitor, she heard the front door of the bar opening. *Shit. Somebody's coming*. Quickly, she ejected the tape and returned it to its place, feeding a blank tape back in the unit to capture the new day's security footage. She turned off the monitor, shuffled the mess on the couch to hide where she'd sat, and stepped out of the office just in time to be seated on a metal stool at the kitchen prep counter when Yui walked through the saloon doors.

"Oh hey! Look who's up! How are you feeling, hon?" Yui waved with two extended fingers, the rest of her hand still clenched around her styrofoam coffee cup.

Ranko rubbed the back of her neck nervously. "Oh, morning, Yui. I'm okay. My head's still

ringing a little, but nothing I can't handle. And I was going a little crazy up there after all this time, so I wanted to come down and see if I could help with anything."

Yui nodded. "I don't doubt it. Mama'll kill me if I put you to work, but how about you sit up front and keep me company?"

Ranko nodded, smiling softly. "I'd like that." It was one thing to know Yui and the other girls had been willing to help her with money and a place to stay, and teach her how to fasten a bra and run a cash register, but Ranko saw them in an entirely new light after learning they had put themselves at risk of physical harm to protect her.

She pushed her way through the saloon door, stepping on the footrest of the nearest bar stool and lifting herself up onto the brown vinyl seat. Yui began slicing fruit for garnishes, just as Ranko had done on her first day. Even though it had only been a few days, being in the main bar again felt surreal to Ranko. She had to fight to keep the flashes of memory from the attack, now bolstered by what she'd seen in the video, from overcoming her senses in the present.

"You holding up okay, Ranko? You look a little... *off*." Yui finished washing her hands, drying them on the thighs of her black jeans before setting to work coring pineapples for the bar's signature *Dragonfire* cocktail. "Anything you wanna talk about?"

I better not tell them I watched the tape, Ranko thought. *They clearly didn't want me to know. But maybe if I can get her to admit it...*

"I'm still trying to remember what happened. Piece things together. But everything after the guy grabbed my necklace is kinda... fuzzy. Mei said I hit my head on the bar?"

The blonde nodded, throwing another handful of pineapple chunks into the commercial juicer behind the service bar. "Mm-hmm. Had a lump the size of a tennis ball, too. Izzi thought she was gonna have to blow out your hair to hide it for a while." She glanced over at the redhead perched on the stool across the counter. "You look like you're doing a bit better now, though. Bruises are almost gone, too."

Ranko nodded, using a bit of her hair to obscure her still-sore cheek from view. She smiled up at the slender barkeep, still somewhat dumbstruck with how her respect for her big sister had managed yet another quantum leap when she had thought it was already at its maximum potential. "Honestly, I'm kinda surprised I didn't get squashed, with everybody tryin' to get out of here before the cops showed up." *C'mon, Yui, take the bait...*

Yui, however, did not even look up from her work, continuing to remove the spiky outer skin of another pineapple with her knife. "Eh, most everybody was outta here already by the time you went down." She turned back to the counter behind the bar, dumping two more heaping handfuls of pineapple chunks into the juicer. "Good thing that doctor guy stuck around to help, though."

The redhead looked down, sighing a bit. *She really doesn't want me to know what they did.* "Yeah, I guess so."

The blonde looked up at her sister with a playful smirk on her face, careful not to distract herself too much from her knife work. "Man, that guy was fallin' all over himself to be useful, too. Could barely talk for the first couple minutes. With the way he was lookin' at you before

shit hit the fan, if I didn't know better, I'd think Dr. Hottie had a thing for you."

"A... *thing*?" Ranko blinked, shaking her head. "Whaddya..."

"A **thing!** Ya know! A crush. An inkling. An infatuation. A *sudden urge to get in your freakin' pants*. **Fuck**, girl, did you fall off the back of a truck or something?!" Yui giggled, rinsing the sticky pineapple juice from her fingers in the steel sink behind the service bar. "I mean, I guess you **do** have a head injury..."

A guy was... interested in me? Ranko blinked again in surprise, her cheeks warming. Besides, like, freakazoids like Kuno who just want anybody they can get their hands on? I mean... a doctor? Like, a respectable guy? The heat in her cheeks could have boiled water for tea. I mean, I guess good on me, especially considering I'm barely figuring out how to girl, but... I don't know how I feel about that.

Her eyes darted around the room, seeking a distraction from her embarrassment. In the periphery of her vision, she noticed something had changed in the room since last she'd seen it. Off in the corner by the ladies' room, the little triangular stage was piled high with... *stuff*. There were dozens of small flower arrangements, small boxes that looked like they might contain candy, a few folded pieces of paper, and even a huge pink teddy bear that was about as tall as Ranko. "What the hell's all **that**?" she asked Yui incredulously.

Yui responded with a warm smile. "That, dear sister, is all for you. The people who were here that night - your *adoring fans* - came back to check on you, and they started leaving things for you when they saw you hadn't been back on stage. They've been worried about you. We haven't said anything publicly; we wanted to wait until you were back on your feet, and give you a chance to decide if you even want to keep working here and singing after all of that. But the gifts kept coming."

I have fans?! Like, people who actually care about me and the fact that I got hurt? Ranko blushed furiously again. "Well, first things first. You're not getting rid of me that easy. I'm not the backing-down type."

Yui smiled. "I kind of figured you'd say something like that."

Ranko slipped off of her bar stool carefully, approaching the stage at an almost timid tiptoe. Yui grinned as she watched her, as it looked quite a lot like Izumi did when she walked up to the Christmas tree.

The young songstress carefully sat cross-legged on the floor at the foot of the stage, beginning to slowly dig through the pile. She had no idea what to do with all of the flowers, but she pulled a particularly pretty white daisy out of one of the bundles and smelled it. She broke the stem off at about seven centimeters, tucking it into her hair behind her right ear. Something about the totality of the experience - having been protected, having been fawned over, having had a moment of vulnerability and living to tell about it, and having been gifted a massive pile of girly treasures to cheer her in her recovery - gave her an even greater comfort in her feminine skin than she'd previously known.

"It's a good look for you." Yui smiled, biting into one of the oranges she had started cutting for garnishes.

Ranko began sorting through the pile, making separate stacks for candies, notes, and

flowers. This done, she opened the first of the notes, expecting it to be some gross declaration of lust from some random dude, but instead found it to be a respectful note that simply read, *Wishing you a fast recovery. We can't wait to see you on stage again!*

The vast majority of the letters were similar in tone, though there was the occasional *get better soon so I can take you on a date* that got tossed aside. There was even one such letter from a girl, with a Polaroid photo included. Ranko jokingly showed it to Yui. "What do you think, sis? Is she your type?"

Yui blushed and shook her head. "Nah. Looks a little young for me, but if I could sing like you, I'd have girls lined up around the block." She sighed wistfully, imagining such a scenario.

The glass double doors at the front of the bar swung open, admitting a bright beam of sunlight. Mei entered the room first, with her sister Izumi in tow. "Oh! Hey Ran-chan! How you feeling?"

The redhead smiled, still sitting on the floor. "Better. Just sitting here going through all this loot." She couldn't help but giggle at the thought of it. She turned back to the pile, pulling the huge pink teddy bear out of the back from where it was leaned into the corner. It was **exactly** the sort of stupid thing she'd always tried to win at the local fairs for Akane, a lifetime ago. Back then, she thought of such things as a kind of goofy gesture, usually to make nice and get Akane to stop pounding the crap out of her for who-knew-what reason, but now, she saw it with a different perspective. Its fur was soft, and it tickled a little as she ran her ever-so-sensitive fingers over it. She imagined it would make a nice pillow. Straightening the red ribbon tied around its neck, she wondered if she should name it. *My gods*, she thought to herself, her eyes rolling harder than she knew possible. *I really have become a freaking girl, haven't I?!*

Ranko stood carefully with a hand up from Mei, propping the bear up in one of the booths on the left side of the room opposite the bar counter. "I think I want to try and sing tonight."

Yui looked over at her from behind the counter, a concerned mask on her face. "Are you **sure** you're ready for that? You don't look especially steady on your feet yet."

Ranko bobbed her head gingerly. "Mei can help me pick out a few songs I can sing standing still, or even sitting down. But, all these people cared enough to do all this for me. I want them to know I'm okay, or that I will be soon enough, at least."

Yui nodded, resting her hands on her hips in an admonishing stance. "Alright, but two conditions. One, you gotta convince Mama when she gets here. If she says no, it's no. And number two: absolutely, positively **no** waiting tables tonight. You can sing, but the rest of the night, your butt is in a chair, and if you touch one glass without drinking from it, I will kick your pretty little ass myself. Have I made myself clear?"

The young singer blushed, looking down shyly. She didn't feel that she needed quite as much babying as she was receiving, but a part of her - that was growing larger than she cared to admit - felt special because they felt inclined to do it.

Izumi grinned excitedly, throwing her arm around Ranko's shoulder. "I'm going to run back home for a minute, then. If tonight is to be your triumphant return, you need an outfit that makes a statement."

Ranko winced, but nodded, a soft smile crossing her lips. She dreaded to even wonder what Izumi would dress her in for her performance, but she almost didn't care as long as she got to sing. She felt ridiculous admitting it, but she ached to feel the cold aluminum of a microphone in her hand again.

As Izumi made for the door, Mei grabbed Ranko by the wrist, hooking her fingers into her younger sister's dragon bracelet and beginning to pull her gently toward the karaoke machine to pick songs.

The pair stopped when Yui snapped her fingers loudly. The sound echoed through the otherwise-quiet bar room, and both young women turned their attention back to the Phoenix's mistress of mixology. "Sorry, sis. Condition number three. Get your little butt upstairs and get some more rest now, while you can. We'll get everything ready for tonight. Mei knows what she's looking for. I'll talk to Mama for you when she gets in. But for now, you, *shoo*."

"Yes, *mother*," Ranko replied in a mocking tone punctuated with a giggle, and she gingerly ade toward the saloon door and her apartment beyond.

Running her hand over the smooth, polyurethane-coated oak of the main bar counter, Ranko closed her eyes and smiled. Her mind was lost in a memory of leaning against the counter while Izumi removed a dab of buttercream frosting from her nose with a napkin on her birthday. She knew every millimeter of the bar after nearly a month of living and working there, and little by little, every corner of it was filling with happy memories and hopeful moments. She flooded her mind with them as she sought to push the memory of the attack from her mind.

She looked over her reflection in the mirrored liquor bottle display mounted to the wall behind the service bar. Izumi had outdone herself for the bar's rising starlet's triumphant return performance. Ranko was wearing a long, form-fitting Chinese style dress in silk, a slightly-off white, with a vine of purple roses climbing up the entire right side of her body. Her hair hung in a loose ponytail secured with a matching off-white ribbon, and Ranko had consented to let Izumi use some makeup to cover the remaining echoes of the bruises on her face and neck. She wore no necklace, as her neck was still a bit sore where she'd been strangled with her choker. With a soft smile, she fingered the silver bracelet clasped around her arm, the silent guardian dragon that sealed the evidence of her past away and allowed her to so embrace her present.

Hana had given her permission for Ranko to sing, subject to all of Yui's conditions and a few more, among those being no physical interaction with the crowd. She would not see her youngest charge at risk of being hurt again before she was fully on her feet and able to defend herself. To ensure her isolation from the audience, Izumi and Mei had cordoned off the entertainment area of the bar with two long tables butted end-to-end. On this makeshift barrier, they'd arranged a hedge of flowers made from all of the floral arrangements Ranko had received from concerned well-wishers. A small **RESERVED** sign, hand-made by Mei, hung from the front edge of the table with clear tape. *It looks like it's set up to receive a frickin' princess or something*, Ranko thought, and her face flushed. She couldn't help but smile at the idea, though.

Off to the side closest to the men's room, by the Pac-Man machine, a separate table had been set up for cards, candies, and all of the other non-floral gifts that Ranko had received. Behind the barricade of tables sat a single high-top table with two chairs situated next to the purple billiards table near the side entrance to the kitchen. Ranko blushed again at an idea she had, slowly walking around the pool table to the makeshift shrine of gifts and lifting the giant pink teddy bear from the pile. It was easily a match in height for Ranko herself, and its legs dragged on the freshly-mopped wood floor as she wrapped her arms around it and carried it to the tall chair closest to her. She propped it up in the chair before gingerly stepping up into the seat opposite it.

"Gotta say, he's a better-looking date than any I've had recently," Mei said with a giggle, propping one of the bear's hands up on the table such that it was almost holding hands with its companion. "Now, you be respectful of my little sister, there, mister bear. I expect you to be a gentleman at all times. No funny business, alright?" She wagged her finger in its face admonishingly. "I don't wanna hafta knock the stuffin' outta you. And I want her home by midnight! You understand me, mister?!"

Ranko giggled loudly, rolling her eyes and shaking her head gingerly. **“Mei!** I already live upstairs, dummy! I **am** home!” Her smile lingered after the laughter had faded, and she sighed happily, basking in the comforting feeling that enveloped her as she considered what she’d just said.

“Fair enough, but I still expect you to behave like a young lady around this one,” Mei said with a tittering grin of her own. “I mean, he hasn’t even had a **drink** yet, and he already **isn’t wearing any pants.**”

The redhead hid her face in her hands, nodding. “I’ll do my best to control myself and behave, but he’s just so **hot**, Mei... I wouldn’t be surprised if he ends up in my bed before the night is out.”

The blue-haired girl smirked, turning her wagging finger to Ranko. “Well, you two be good. And if you can’t be good? *Name the baby after me.*” She looked down at her plastic pink Hello Kitty watch before turning her eyes back up to her sister. “You about ready to do this thing, sis?”

Ranko took a deep breath and exhaled slowly, nodding to Mei. **“Let them in.”**

Mei unlocked the door and a stream of excited customers began to enter, many filtering either to one of the tables in the center of the bar room, or to the counter to queue for drinks from Ranko’s sister Yui. As she was largely hidden around the corner behind the service bar, Ranko was able to observe in relative obscurity, and she noticed that several of them were carrying flowers and other gifts. Some of the offering-bearing patrons walked to the back corner to place their tributes. Finding the makeshift shrine that had been erected over the previous three days missing, several craned their necks and scanned the bar for an alternate place to leave them.

A tall blond man in a red-and-black plaid shirt and blue jeans, bearing a dozen red roses, was the first to spy the young songstress and her stuffed pink beau at her two-top table. He whooped loudly, waving to the crowd in his excitement. **“You guys! She’s here!”**

Ranko stood, making her way to the border of her little cordoned-off prison. She walked on her own, but stayed close enough to the barricade of tables that she could lean on it for support if she had to. Some seventy people gathered on the other side of the barrier, at a ratio of close to three guys for every two ladies.

If this keeps up, Hana’s probably going to get a visit from the fire marshal, Ranko thought with an easy smile as she waved to the assembling well-wishers. “Hi, everybody! Thanks so much for coming out to see me, and for checking on me all week long. And all this **stuff! Gods!** Christmas isn’t even for a few more weeks yet!”

“We love you, Ranko!” came an excited shout from a short man in a tan suit coat and slacks near the back of the throng.

The redhead blushed deeply, using the pretense of brushing her hair from her eyes to hide her face with her hand. “Yeah? Well, I love you guys too. And don’t you worry too much about me. I’m doing much better! I’m not 100% back to normal yet, but don’t you worry! I’ll be slinging shots again in no time.”

The crowd whooped in encouragement.

Ranko grinned devilishly. “*Waaaaait a minute!* You all aren’t here because you like it when I bring you your beers and fries at all, **are you?**”

A loud chorus of “**NO!**” responses rose in unison from the amassing crowd.

Mei rolled her eyes at Izumi, having slipped out from between the twin bar counters to watch Ranko’s homecoming reception. She tried to tell herself that it was only to celebrate with her, and not also to keep an eye on the crowd and make sure no one else had any designs on hurting her little sister. “She’s eating this up, isn’t she? I mean, look at her! You’d think she’s been doing this her whole life.”

Before Izumi, who was shaking a cocktail behind the service bar in a red floral dress, could answer, Yui did so from her position behind the main bar as she caught a bottle of vodka she’d tossed behind her back. “Yes. And she deserves to.”

Ranko grinned in devious excitement. “So, lemme get this straight: you want me to **sing**, then? Is that it?!” The crowd cheered in unison, and Ranko met it with a tittering laugh. “I’ll just have to see what I can do for ya. **After** you order lots of yummy drinks from my sisters, that is.” The young songstress cringed, watching the herd turn and move as a single stampede from her little promenade to the bar counter. *Oof*, she thought, inhaling sharply through gritted teeth. *Sorry, Yui...* She wished she could run behind the bar to help with the rush she’d created, but it had been expressly forbidden by Yui herself and Hana both.

While the crowd was occupied with the acquisition of libations, Ranko slipped around the line of tables and made her way carefully along the back wall of the bar toward the stage. She stepped up onto the raised platform, where Mei had left another high-backed stool for her. Climbing up into it, she picked up the handheld microphone from its stand and laid it on her lap in the little hammock formed by her skirt between her thighs.

She waited there for a good twenty minutes until the crowd had mostly settled, picking up her microphone and flicking the switch on its neck with her thumb to turn it on. “Okay. Whew! It’s **so good** to be back up here again, Phoenix!”

The audience roared in agreement. It was quite clear Ranko had not been the only one who had lamented her absence on the little triangular corner stage of the venue that was rapidly becoming one of the hottest little dive bars in Minato.

“Yeah, I missed you all, too.”

She nodded to Mei, who pressed the start key on the computer. A sultry melody rose from the speakers, a Japanese pop ballad from some 25 years before Ranko’s birth. She and Mei had decided that these lower-energy, older songs would be a safer way to make her return, as they minimized the expectation of choreography and vigorous performance.

The room went silent as the bar’s lone spotlight kicked on, focused on the redhead seated on the stage. Even from as far away as the light was, mounted in the trusswork in the bar’s open ceiling, its warmth prickled every cell of Ranko’s skin, but it wasn’t uncomfortable. Rather, it felt like a warm embrace, enveloping her entire being and welcoming it home.

As Ranko’s voice rose to begin the first verse, Izumi smiled, swaying softly with the music and playing with the hem of her dress behind the service bar. She wished she had thought to put little candles on all the tables; it would have really set the mood for the intimate and old-

fashioned, *glamorous lounge singer* nature of Ranko's return performance.

During the bridge of the song, Ranko thought she might want to stand up, but as she put one foot on the floor, she felt herself wobble slightly. She had to steady herself with an extended arm just to remain perched atop her stool. *Better not push it just yet*, Ranko decided. *Thank goodness Izzi didn't try to put me in high heels or nothin'.*

Hana noticed the minor stumble, watching her youngest charge intently from behind the cordon of tables and flowers and searching for any sign that Ranko was pushing herself too hard. The guests seemed not to pick up on the little glitch in the performance, however.

What the young singer could not manage in physicality, she poured into her voice, finishing the song on a long-sustained belt. The crowd, which now numbered in excess of two hundred, roared in appreciation. She smiled, panning her eyes across the crowd. The ceiling-mounted spotlight caught the corner of her eyes, and she cringed and squinted as she shrunk back from its glare on her stool. The bright light in her eyes aggravated the still-persistent thrumming headache in the back of her skull, and she resigned herself to asking Mei to turn the spotlight off for the remainder of the evening's performances.

"Thank you, everyone." She didn't dare try to stand and bow; she knew she would almost certainly topple over.

Hana slipped around the barrier of tables blocking off the gaming area of the bar and made her way to the tiny little stage, offering her hand up to Ranko. "C'mon, break time for a minute, honey."

Ranko nodded, taking the barkeep's hand and rising unsteadily to her feet.

The Phoenix's matriarch yelled to the crowd, needing no microphone to be heard over the din. "Back up! Give her some space, everybody!"

The group took a few steps back from the stage platform, giving Hana a clear pathway to escort Ranko back to her seat. Ranko clung to her arm, trying her best to put on an air of confidence as she walked and failing entirely. The crowd murmured a little at the sight. It was obvious that the singer was not well enough to perform, but she was doing so anyway. *For them.* Ranko looked up at them as she paused between steps, noting the dismay on the faces of the few in front, and furrowed her brow in a frown.

One of the young men in front, the guy in the suit coat and jeans, raised a cheer and started clapping again. Soon, the two friends he'd come with joined in, and then others. The applause settled into a rhythm, almost like a marching cadence. The encouragement brought a smile to Ranko's face and a bit more steel to her spine, and it did not stop until she was seated back at her table.

Izumi walked over to her table, serving tray in hand. She placed a glass of soda in front of her sister, and an unopened bottle of beer in front of Ranko's teddy bear. "For your companion. **On the house.**" She giggled a little, pushing her way back toward the bar before giving Ranko a chance to respond.



The rest of the evening had gone much the same as it began, with Ranko singing slow standards one at a time from a seated position. She'd performed more songs than usual, though; where normally she only sang two or three times a night, on that night, she managed six. The arrayed row of tables had been piled higher still with more flowers and gifts, delivered by well-wishers who had not yet expected to find her up and about.

As the last patrons exited the bar at closing time, Hana slipped through the side door from the kitchen behind the pool table and approached Ranko's table with a proud smile. "What do we think? Is my little star ready to call it a night?"

Ranko frowned, slumping on her elbows and supporting her chin in her hands. "Can't I please help with cleanup, at least a little? I could roll silverware or something like that sitting down."

Hana shook her head emphatically. "You knew the rules, and you agreed to them. **Maybe** tomorrow, if you're feeling up to it. Now, come on, sweetheart. Let's get you up to bed."

"*Alright, alright.*" She waved good night to her sisters as Hana escorted her through the side door and toward the stairs to her little apartment.

"I'm so proud of you, you know," Hana said as the pair ascended the steps at a snail's pace. "The way they gravitate to you out there... you're really something, you know that?"

Ranko blushed, waving Hana's words out of the air with her left hand even as her right maintained a death grip on the handrail of the narrow staircase. "I give Izzi's dress at **least** forty percent of the credit. I'm just... I dunno, it just feels nice to do something people care about. Something that makes people like me. I never thought people would *celebrate* me like that. I don't know what to do with it."

Hana smiled as she eased Ranko onto the landing at the top of the steps, reaching for the door to the little apartment and pushing it open. "You enjoy it. But you don't ever let yourself fall into the trap of thinking it's the only reason people like you, sweetheart."

The redhead shrugged, grasping her benefactor's arm tight with a quiet creak from the black leather of Hana's jacket sleeve as she kicked off her shoes. "I mean, nobody ever felt that way about me before I started singing. So, that's gotta be it, I guess."

"Alternatively," Hana said as she led Ranko to the bed, "it's probably because they just hadn't gotten to know you yet."

Sho and Ashi leaned against the brick wall, holding hands. The couple was on their third date, though they were out with a group of friends. Ashi had dressed up for the occasion, draped in a smoldering orange minidress and matching stilettos. Sho had not, content with a gray turtleneck and a pair of black jeans.

Behind them, the rest of their collegiate classmates tittered excitedly. Haite and Chui giggled, planning what they would sing if they got a chance to use the karaoke machine. They were dressed in matching seifuku despite the December chill, hoping to look like a popular idol group onstage. Keiichi sipped surreptitiously from the aluminum flask he'd hidden in the pocket of his khakis, not willing to wait until six o'clock for his buzz to begin.

It was certainly an unusual experience for the group to see a line some three hundred people deep in front of their usual Wednesday hangout, given that it was just a run-down dive bar in a less-than-great neighborhood by the harbor. But that night wasn't just any Wednesday night. The night before, the bar's singing sensation of a waitress had announced that the following day, she'd resume performing at full speed - just a week after some thug had beat the crap out of her in the bar and gotten himself arrested. Word had spread, and all of the regulars - and quite a few people who were not - wanted to see her back in action.

Ume groaned, tapping her foot on the pavement in boredom as she leaned on the brick wall. "You guys, do we **really** have to stand here and wait for this? I mean, it's *karaoke*. There's like forty other places around here for that, and most of 'em have private rooms."

Satoshi shook his head in frustration with his disaffected date. "That's not the point, babe. We're here to see **her** sing."

Ume popped her chewing gum in her mouth to punctuate her disapproval. "What's the big deal with this waitress, anyway? She can't be **that** great, if she's still slinging beer. Do you even know her fuckin' name?"

Satoshi scoffed, rolling his eyes with a slight shake of his head. "Of course I do! It's *Ranko Tendo*."

Ume gave a thoughtful "huh," rubbing her chin contemplatively. She turned to the tallish brunette in line behind her. "**Tendo**. Nabiki, isn't that **your** name?"



Ranko paced nervously. She felt like she was waiting for her opponent to show up for a big fight. *Not sure I'd have dressed like this to throw down with Ryoga, though. Idiot probably wouldn't even recognize me right now in all this getup. He'd probably think I was his long-lost sister or something. Friggin' moron.*

With a **slam** from the saloon door, Mei emerged from the back room in a knee-length denim skirt and a black sweater featuring a blocky alien from *Space Invaders* in white. “Holy crap, Ranko! I went out on the roof to look, and... there’s gotta be four hundred people waiting out there! Maybe **more!**” She grinned proudly at the redhead, who still stalked back and forth across the stained hardwood floor. “We should start selling tickets!”

Ranko blushed. “We’re selling twice as many drinks as we used’ta already.” She wore a form-fitting mauve sweater dress with a large red heart embroidered on the front. Determined to prove to Yui that her balance was fully restored, she’d opted to brave a pair of sleek black ankle boots with six-centimeter heels. The distinctive **clack** they made on the floor echoed through the empty room like a ticking clock as she paced.

Izumi smiled back at her sisters from the double doors, leaning against the brass handles in an ivory long-sleeved dress with white fur lining the sleeves, neckline and knee-length hem. “Alright, girls. Is everybody ready for me to unleash the hounds?”

Ranko took a deep breath and exhaled slowly, putting on a bright stage smile. “I think so.”

Yui and Mei nodded their assent, and Izumi unlocked the door and stepped out into the cold. “Hey everybody! Who’s ready for a show?”

A roar erupted from the assembled revelers. “Let us in already! It’s **freezing** out here!” one guy yelled from near the back of the line.

Izumi smiled, stepping out of the doorway and holding the door open. “Let’s go, then!” The group began streaming into the establishment, and Izumi struggled to keep count with her small silver baseball pitch counter as they did.

In short order, the bar had filled to capacity, with Izumi having to turn the last fifty or so people away due to the fire marshall’s maximum occupancy rules. Most opted to stay in the line until someone else left. Izumi slipped back into the building, where Mei and Hana were working to get people sorted into booths and the handful of tables near the front of the establishment that hadn’t been removed for the evening to create more room for standing patrons.

The bar was lined four deep all the way around, and Yui was working frantically to fill drink orders. Knowing Mei and her mother would not be submitting orders from the tables for a few moments yet, Izumi slid behind the main bar alongside her sister and began plowing through an order for four *Dragonfires* to lend a hand. Somewhere at the back, beyond Izumi’s sight in the sea of revelers, Ranko was also trying to direct traffic, though it was proving largely ineffective - a crowd of well-wishers tended to form around her wherever she stood. Mei saw a large group of eight college-aged patrons enter together, directing them to the largest booth in the front corner. It was furthest from the stage, but with that many people, Ranko wouldn’t have time to serve them all effectively, so Izumi felt that it was best to seat them in her section.

It took nearly a half an hour to get most of the bar served and settled. No announcement was made over the bar’s emcee microphone, but as soon as the house lights dropped, the crowd roared in excitement. Ranko put down her serving tray and bounded up to the stage, smiling brightly and waving to the crowd. She’d donned a pair of pink-rimmed sunglasses; they were a recent addition to her wardrobe Izumi had bought her to help during her light-sensitive performances, but she kind of liked them.

The bass brought the crowd to its feet, and she moved effortlessly across the tiny stage, mimicking the movements of Seiko Matsuda as she performed a rendition of *Tenshi no Wink*. She spared no effort to deliver a high-energy performance despite the song's slow beginning; after a week under wraps, she was eager to prove to the crowd - and to her coworkers - that she was back at full strength.

The whole place shook with applause when the song ended, and Ranko gave the crowd a deep bow and an excited wave before hopping down from the stage and reclaiming her serving tray from atop the karaoke station. Working the back half of the bar closest to the stage, she buzzed around to check on her tables, posing for the odd Polaroid photo as she collected a new round of orders and stacked empty glasses on her tray.

"Hey, Ranko! Will you sign something for me?" A stocky man in his early twenties in a purple tee shirt waved to her, a hopeful expression in his eyes as she returned from the bar to hand him his bloody Mary.

Ranko blushed; she wondered if it would ever feel normal to be asked such a thing, but she strongly doubted it. "Sure, whatcha got?" She reached into the pocket black nylon half-apron she wore over her sweater dress, pulling out a fine black marker.

The patron turned in his seat and leaned down toward the table. "Just, somewhere on the back of my shoulder there?"

The young singer blinked, giving her guest a skeptical look. *He wants me to... write... on him? That's so fucking weird.* She uncapped the marker, cautiously approaching. As she tentatively touched the marker to his back, his shirt slid under it.

"It's okay to lean on me, you know. You're pretty small; I think I can take it," the man said with a grin.

Ew. Eww eww eww, Ranko thought as she held his shirt still with the barest pinch of two fingers, crinkling her nose long enough to write the five romaji characters of her name. She really did like how her name looked that way, especially because it was more visually distinct from her old signature in kanji or hiragana when she still called herself *Ranma*. "There you go!"

The muscular fan beamed proudly as Ranko capped her marker. "Thanks! I'll never wash this shirt again!"

Have you ever washed it before? Ranko thought as she walked away, her customer service smile fading as soon as she was out of his view. *Gods, the smell. As someone who spent most of her life as a guy, I think I've earned the right to say it: dudes are fucking gross sometimes.*

As she passed the Pac-Man machine in the entertainment section of the bar, she noticed a spiral of orange peel on the floor under the pool table. She carefully balanced her tray of empty glasses on the corner of the purple-felted table, leaning down to pick up the discarded garnish, lifting her left leg gracefully for counterbalance as she dipped down.

While she was bent low enough for her ponytail to be dragging the hardwood floor, she caught motion out of the corner of her eye. She turned her head, seeing her tray and the stack of glasses it carried falling toward the floor. Reflexively, she lunged forward with the

incredible speed only a master martial artist could muster, catching each glass and restoring it to the tray before it hit the ground. *Whew, that was close.* As she started to rise to a standing position, she heard someone clear her throat behind her and a familiar female voice spoke.

“Busted. Hello, **Ranma.**”

Ranko froze. **No.** *This can't be happening. Not here. Not now.* She turned her head tentatively, hiding her face behind her hand. *Please be wrong please be wrong please be wrong...* She was not. “Uh, Hey, Nabiki. Wha... *what brings you here?*” She instinctively tried to cover her dress with her other hand, not that it did much good.

Nabiki scoffed in irritation, putting her hands on her hips. **“I** am a college freshman. I'm **supposed** to be hanging out in bars. But you? Where the hell have you **been** all these months?! We've all been worried **sick** about you!”

Ranko cringed, waving toward the floor with her hands. **“Please,** keep your voice down.”

Nabiki rested her fists on the hips of her skinny jeans, a judgmental glare in her eyes. “What's the matter, **Ranko?** Afraid everyone will find out you've been **lying** to them all this time?!”

Ranko's eyes flashed with irritation. “I'm **not** lying!”

Nabiki nodded, pursing her lips. “So everyone here knows you're really a **boy**, then?”

Ranko looked down at her hands in shame. It had been days since she'd even *thought* about her old life. She said something, in the most timid, quiet voice imaginable, easily drowned out by the two drunken harbor workers' karaoke performance on the stage.

“What's that? I couldn't **hear** you!” Nabiki growled, stepping closer to her sister's erstwhile betrothed.

Ranko gritted her teeth. Even though she'd accepted it nearly two weeks ago, she'd never really had to say it out loud before. “I said, *I'm not a boy.* Not anymore.”

Mei walked toward the pair, her own serving tray in hand. “Ran-chan? Who's...”

The redhead cut her off. “Uh, yes ma'am, the bathroom is right around the corner there to your left. Thank you.” Once Mei had passed on her way back toward the front of the bar, Ranko took Nabiki by the wrist. “Come on. We can't talk here.”

Nabiki glowered. “Hey! **Let me go!**”

Ranko pulled her through the side door by the pool table into the back, dragging her through the kitchen, and pushed her toward the stairs. “Go on.”

Nabiki opened the door into Ranko's bedroom. The unmade bed, with its lavender duvet cover, was half-covered with dresses, outfits Izumi had brought for Ranko to choose from that had ultimately been rejected. A laundry hamper in the corner overflowed with several more dresses, and the little dinette table off to the left was half-covered with Izumi's makeup supplies and a small pile of hair accessories.

Ranko closed the door behind herself, leaning on it as if to keep the world out for a few more minutes.

As soon as the door latched, Nabiki turned on the redhead, pointing a finger in her face. **“Honestly**, Ranma, where do you get off doing this?! Just walking out on us in the middle of the night like that? You could have been dead under a bridge for all we knew, and you’re here, in some bar in Minato, slinging shots in a dress and high heels? **What the hell are you thinking?”**

“Please, Nabiki, sit down?” Ranko offered Nabiki one of the white pine dinette chairs before sitting on the side of the bed facing it, shoving a frilly orange dress out of the way. The brunette complied, after some additional coaxing.

Ranko sighed, staring down at her hands. She’d been dreading this conversation for some time, but she’d honestly hoped it would never come. “Look. I don’t expect you to understand. But, **look at me**. This is what I am now, and it’s not gonna change. I didn’t ask for this, but it happened, and I had to make peace with it somehow. But I couldn’t do that with everybody at your house wondering when or if some Chinese fairy dust was gonna show up and make it so I could be... what I was, and marry Akane. She deserved better than waiting for me forever, and having to explain to everybody why she was engaged to a freakin’ **girl**. She deserved more than the parade of whacko guys and crazy girls showin’ up and wreckin’ your house every three days ‘cause of me.”

She just... deserved better than me.

“And don’t you think she **deserved** to make that choice for herself?!” Nabiki’s seething fury boiled in her eyes as she rocked in her chair, as if trying to restrain herself from launching out of it again.

Ranko nodded, a deep sorrow in her distant gaze. “You’re probably right. But you know she never would’ve given up. Akane’s too damned stubborn for that.”

“So were you, once.” Nabiki shook her head.

“I was a lot of things, *once*.” Ranko sighed, curling her legs under her and hugging her knees while leaving her heeled boots dangling off the edge of the bed. *“How is she?”*

Nabiki groaned, rolling her eyes. “Not like you care, but she’s been a freakin’ mess since you left.”

The younger girl nodded, hanging her head sadly. “I gave it a week after I left before Ryoga made his move.”

Nabiki nodded, scoffing a bit under her breath and crossing her arms over her chest. “Oh, he did. He finally managed to find his balls and told Akane how he felt about her. He told her he’d do absolutely anything to make her happy.”

Ranko laughed, but there was a bit of dark glumness in it. “Typical Hibiki, with all that blustery chivalry. So what did she ask for?”

Nabiki stood, stomping her foot on the floor as she leaned over the seated girl that had once been her sister’s boyfriend. “It’s not funny, Ranma! You want to know what she asked Ryoga

for? Alright, I'll tell you! She asked him to find **you!**”

“Oh, that’s not fair to him. He’ll be looking for forty years just trying to find a freakin’ payphone.” Ranko knew her onetime frenemy would do exactly as Akane had asked, and he’d never stop looking for her. Even with all the pity she felt for him, though, she felt more worried about the day that, by some miracle, he *did* stumble onto her.

“Of **course** it’s not fair! But you obviously didn’t care about what was fair for anybody except yourself when you skipped town to do... *whatever the hell this is*. How could you do this?!” Nabiki paced around the small room, fury in her eyes. “How could you not at least send us a letter to let us know you were all right? How could you not think we’d worry about you?! Honestly, **what the hell is the matter with you, Ranma?**”

She was surprised to see that Ranko did not retaliate. Instead, the redhead shrank under Nabiki’s tirade. Ranko squeezed her knees tighter, burying her head in them as if to hide from the sound of Nabiki’s voice.

The brunette shuddered slightly, stepping closer with surprise and a little worry in her eyes. *What the... this isn’t right*. Nabiki’s voice softened, taking on a slight note of concern. “Ranma?”

A mousey voice trickled out from behind Ranko’s clenched thighs. “*Please don’t call me that.*”

Nabiki rolled her eyes toward the ceiling, shaking her head in irritation. “Why the heck wouldn’t I? Whatever game you’re playing here, that’s your name.”

Ranko unburied her head from her knees, a soft but steady stream of tears running down her cheeks. “Not anymore, Nabiki. Don’t you get it? Ranma Saotome is dead. He’s **dead!** That Amazon witch killed him. I’m all that’s left. And you and Akane and Pop and everybody kept standing around waiting for me to shrug everything off and step back into a life that wasn’t mine anymore, and I just couldn’t do it. I’m sorry I did what I did, okay?! I am. It was selfish and stupid, I know, and believe me, I’ve paid for it. I don’t expect you to understand.”

Wait, is she... crying? Ranma would never have let me, or anyone, see him cry. He’s way too macho for that. What the hell is even happening right now? Nabiki covered her gaping mouth with her hand, listening to the young woman’s declaration.

“But I’m not sorry for where I ended up,” Ranko continued, a measure of confidence returning to her voice. “These people treat me with love and respect. They don’t know anything about Jusenkyo or nothin’, and so, in their eyes, I can be a girl - be a **woman** - and not be seen as something **less** than I used to be. Like there’s something **wrong** with me, and everybody’s gotta walk around feeling sorry for me and looking at me like I got four heads.

“Is that what I would have asked for? Of **course** not. But it’s the best I’m going to get, and for the first time in my life, I’m trying to make the best of it for me - not what Pop and your dad and every girl in Nerima has all planned out for me, but **what I want for myself**. If I couldn’t have my old life anymore, I had to decide that I deserved a chance to try to make a new one that I could actually live with and not be ashamed of all the time. And you know what? I’m doing so much better than that. I can’t believe it, I swear. I thought I’d be miserable every second of my existence if I had to live this way, but I had no choice but to give myself a

chance. And, I did, and... here I sit, in a dress and heels, wearing makeup, and somehow, I'm actually **happy**, for the first time I can remember."

She looked up, making eye contact with the brown-haired specter of the past she'd almost managed to bury. "You have the power to go downstairs right now, say just a couple of words to the girls behind the bar, and destroy all of that for me. I'm **begging** you not to. **Please**, Nabiki."

Ranko flinched as a loud knock came at the door, followed by a voice. "Oi, Ranko! You okay, little sister? Mei's got your next song queued up whenever you're ready."

Nabiki blinked, looking at the door with a skeptical air about her. *Sister?! What the hell kind of bar is this?!*

Ranko sniffled her nose and wiped her puffy eyes. "I'm okay, Yui. I'll be right down." She looked up at Nabiki, and all she could add was another desperate, nearly-silent *"please?"*

Nabiki wanted to be furious with Ranma. She wanted to beat his head in with a frying pan for what he had done to her sister. For the months of worry. For all the nights she and Kasumi had spent holding Akane while she cried. Ranma Saotome absolutely, positively deserved to be clobbered into next week. But this... *girl?* Nabiki didn't know who the person crying on the edge of that mattress full of dresses was, but she was not recognizable as Ranma in any discernible way beyond physical appearance. The brash, egotistical, uncaring jerk she'd come up that narrow flight of stairs intending to berate was nowhere to be found, and in his place was a fragile, terrified, remorseful, and beautiful young *woman*.

Nabiki sighed with exasperation and defeat, slumping her shoulders and throwing her hands up. "Come here." She walked to the dinette table, scooping up her small black purse.

"Why?! What are you going to do?" Ranko looked up at her, fear in her eyes.

I can't fucking believe I'm going along with this. Nabiki sighed heavily again as she popped open the little clasp on her purse. "With all this crying, you went and fucked up your makeup. You can't go out there looking like that."

Ranko blushed, trying again to dry her eyes. "Really?! T... *thanks*, Nabiki."

Nabiki began dabbing a soft pad on the smaller girl's cheeks, grumbling as the redhead wiggled under her touch. "Hold **still**, you! Sheesh, you're worse than Akane!" She chuckled quietly under her breath. "So, what **exactly** am I supposed to tell her when I get home?"

Ranko pulled back from the cotton makeup pad, looking up at Nabiki with a sincere expression and no small amount of fear in her eyes. "You can't tell her **anything**. She can't find out where I am. **Nobody** can. **Please**, Nabiki."

"Come on, Ranm..." Nabiki shook her head. *I guess for the moment, I can play along, until I understand more about what the heck's happening here.* "Sorry. But, Ranko, you **know** I can't keep this from her. Even **I'm** not **that** good of a liar. So give me **something** I can say."

Ranko sighed, hanging her head until Nabiki tilted her chin back up with her finger to resume working on her cosmetics. "Tell her I'm okay and I'm in a good place. Tell her I have people who care about me. And, Nabiki? Tell her I'm **so sorry**."

With less than a half an hour until opening, Ranko and her sisters buzzed around the back room of the Phoenix making their final preparations. Ranko was wearing a simple yellow A-line dress and black flats. She found the more elaborate outfits Izumi would normally have chosen for her stage performances to be too difficult to manage on the weekend shifts when she also had to move with nearly superhuman agility just to keep her tables' drinks full. Her hair was tied back in a simple, unbraided ponytail with a wide length of yellow satin ribbon.

The redhead shivered as she stepped out of the walk-in cooler, dropping a large package of raw ground beef on the steel prep counter in front of her youngest sister. Her eyes scanned the counter. *Okay, she's got all the spices she needs for the burger patties and the chicken batter, flour, buttermilk, eggs. Good. What else...*

"Whoa!"

Ranko whipped her head around toward the sound coming from the hallway, reaching her hand out at lightning speed just in time to steady the large tray of clean pilsner glasses that teetered precariously from Izumi's shoulder. "Careful there, sis!"

Izumi blushed, nodding her thanks as Ranko took the tray from her. "Sorry, I just lost my balance there for a second."

With a chuckle and a shake of her head, Ranko carried the tray toward the front of the bar, with Izumi holding the saloon door open for her. "Maybe if you didn't try to work in heels the width of a freakin' pencil eraser, it wouldn't be so hard."

"Problem is," Yui said with a playful sneer as she added an armful of tequila bottles to the shelf behind the bar, "... if she didn't, then people wouldn't stare at her ass quite so much."

"Excuse me," Izumi said, her fists resting on the hips of her silver dress. "I don't *need* anybody staring at me. I already *have* a boyfriend, little miss *hasn't had a date in years*. Maybe we need to put *your* little beanpole ass in some shorter skirts and market the goods a little better."

The blonde scoffed, waving her sister off with the back of her hand. "Not my fault they ain't made a girl that can handle all of this yet. Save your frilly shit for the idol in the family, Iz."

"I am *not* an idol!" Ranko blushed, turning her face away from her sister. "I'm a *waitress*."

Yui laughed, shelving a fresh bottle of mezcal. "Whatever you say, star."

The redhead smirked. "Well, I don't have to take this kind of crap from you. I've got work to do. So, *hmmph!*"

Giggling, she pushed her way back through the blue saloon door, hanging a right into Hana's office with a knock on the partially-ajar door. "Hey, Mama? We're almost ready out here. You need anything?"

The bar's proprietress raised her eyes to the door. Her leather-encased elbows were propped on the desk, and she was holding her head in her hands as she pored over some paperwork on the ever-cluttered desktop. "Oh, thanks, honey. I'd love a beer, if you get a second."

"Comin' right up," Ranko replied cheerily, buzzing back to the front room. She ignored her tittering sisters as she plucked a brown glass bottle from the well behind the service bar, doing her best to avoid touching any of the crushed ice. With a spring in her step, she hurried back to the dingy business office, handing over the bottle. "Here ya go!"

Hana reached out for the bottle, popping its cap off on the edge of her desk. The whole edge of the desktop hanging over her lap was so chipped and scratched from its repeated use as a bottle opener, it looked as if the wood had been hewn by the teeth of beavers. "Thanks, baby."

"Sure thing, Mama!" Ranko gave a little wave, speeding back to the kitchen. "How you holding up back here, Mei? Anything else you need?"

Mei wiped her brow on the green puffy sleeve of her peasant shirt as she plopped another chunk of ground beef onto the work surface. She motioned to the large trash can on the floor next to the counter top, on which the empty ground beef packaging precariously hung from the top of the overflowing contents. "Actually, hon, could you take that out, please? I'm up to my elbows in hamburger."

The redhead smiled. "No problem!" She pulled the bag out of the trash, tying it off in a double knot, humming merrily to herself. She popped open the back door, slipping out into the December chill of the alley with the bag. The door slammed shut behind her as she stepped out into the light dusting of snow in the dark. *Fuck, it's getting cold out here. I need to tell Izumi to start bringing me longer skirts to wear or something, or forget being a pop star, I'm gonna be a pop-sicle.* She whispered a silent prayer of thanks, not for the first or the last time, that she was not still spending her nights sleeping on a park bench around the corner from the nearby train station.

She turned to head for the dumpster, and completed only one step toward it before she froze in her tracks, dropping the bag on the ground.

In the alleyway was a figure that struck more terror into Ranko than she knew possible. Not if the god of death himself were patrolling the space between the bar and the hardware store would Ranko have been so mortified. The shadowed figure was sitting on a pile of discarded wooden shipping pallets. In the dim of the alley, it was hard to see their face, but there was no mistaking them. Ranko would know that white-and-blue dress anywhere. She almost was forced to wear one once.

"A... **Akane?!**"

A pointed reply came from the dark. "So. It's **true.**"

No point denying anything. Fucking Nabiki. I asked you. I begged you. How could you... Ranko sighed defeatedly, her shoulders slumping. "She told you everything, didn't she?"

Akane nodded, with a quiet chuckle under her breath. "Of all the people to trust with your secret, you picked the one that can be easily bought." Akane had decided to spare her the

truth, that Nabiki had volunteered everything right away once she saw how frantic her little sister had become at the knowledge that Ranma was, in fact, **alive**.

Ranko backed away until her bare shoulders made contact with the cold red brick wall of the bar. "Akane, please. **I can explain.**" She put her empty palms up defensively, fully prepared for a fist, a hammer, or some improvised projectile to come flying at her any moment.

The young barmaid's once-fiancée climbed down off the pallets to her feet, approaching slowly. "You look good."

Ranko blinked quizzically. "*Uh... Thanks?*"

Akane cracked a small smile as she took another step closer. "No, I mean it. You always were prettier than me."

The redhead gulped quietly. *Okay, what the hell is happening here?*

Akane closed another step, and Ranko began stammering. "Uhh, so, listen Akane, I... I'm **really** sorry, okay?! I know I was a jerk and I..."

Akane took another step.

Ranko swallowed hard. "I shouldn't have left, I know. I just didn't feel like I could..."

Another step.

"Look, Akane, I didn't mean to..."

Akane took the last few steps at a run, leaping forward and slamming into the smaller girl's body. She wrapped her arms tightly around Ranko, squeezing as hard as she could. "I'm just... thank the **gods** you're okay! I've been **so worried!**"

Ranko stood petrified in the hug for a moment, struggling to both adjust to the surprising turn of events, and to will some air back into her lungs. Eventually, her muscles began to relax, and she returned the embrace. "I know. I really am sorry, Akane."

Akane let her go, looking down into her eyes. "No. **I'm** sorry. I put so much pressure on you. Me, and our dads, and Xian Pu, and everybody, we all did. I never trusted you like I should have. I never listened. We should have been trying to support you when... everything happened, and we ran you off. But I did, most of all."

The waitress shook her head. "Akane, no. I remember the night I left. You were the only one who even **tried** to have anything nice to say to me."

Akane nodded, a tear starting to form in the corner of her eye. "I know. But I didn't say anything to **them**. I should have stood up for you. I should have had your back like you always had mine. I should have made them back off, and maybe give you some more space to process everything. I owed you that much. This is all my fault. Everything that happened to you. Xian Pu's grandmother only did this to you because you wouldn't let me go."

Ranko clasped her hands on Akane's shoulders, extending her arms and locking her elbows. "Akane, no. She did it to me because she's a **crazy person**. It's not your fault. And

besides... I'm okay. Really! It's been a hell of a road to get here, but I'm finally starting to get comfortable with the person - with the **girl** - I see in the mirror. I mean it." She smiled warmly at Akane, her shoulders relaxing a bit as she gained a bit more confidence that her former fiancée might not actually be there with the intention of beating her half to death. *It really is nice to talk to her again. There's so much I wanna tell her.*

"So, I hear you're a **singer** now?" Akane flashed a sly grin. "You?"

Ranko blushed, sitting down on the concrete stoop outside the back door of the bar. "I'm a **waitress**, who sometimes sings. Big difference." *It's so weird, admitting to Akane that I'm a waitress - hell, admitting that I'm starting to be okay with feeling like a girl at all. And yet, somehow, it's not making me want to just run and hide like I thought it would. What does it...*

Akane nodded with an amused smile. "You're not, huh? When were you planning on telling the line of people out front that?"

Ranko giggled, blushing a bit at the idea of doing so in front of Akane. "Right about the time I brought them their appetizers, I guess."

Akane sat next to the redhead on the stoop, smoothing out the skirt of her school pinafore between her knees. "It's good to see you smile again."

The redhead nodded. "It's good to see you **at all** again. I really have missed you, Akane."

Akane leaned over, resting her head on Ranko's left shoulder and wrapping her arms around her bicep. "You could have called me anytime, you know, dummy."

Ranko sighed. "I didn't want you to be ashamed of me. I couldn't handle the thought of it."

Akane sat up again, looking over at Ranko incredulously. "Are you **kidding**? Ever since, ya know, *all this* happened, all I wanted was for you to find a way to be happy, and you have. True, it's not anything like what I **expected**, but if it's working for you, I'm glad." She traced her finger around the silver bracelet on Ranko's wrist, the dragon's sapphire eye shining up at her as if it were amused with some playful secret it refused to divulge. "This is really pretty."

Ranko nodded, her lips cracking a tentative smile. "It was a birthday present from Yui. She's one of the girls who works here. **So much more** than that, but... it's a lot to explain. I like that it hides my scar from... *ya know*."

Akane nodded. "Yeah. I do, too. It works for you."

"How's everybody back at home?" Ranko rubbed her temples, in large part to have an excuse to hide her flushing cheeks from the girl she once thought she'd be forced to marry.

Akane rolled her eyes. "As crazy as usual, I guess. Once they realized you weren't coming back, Xian Pu and her grandmother closed their ramen shop and left town. Went back to China, I think. I hear Ukyo's thinking about opening a bigger location in their old building. My family's pretty much the same, I guess. Your **father**..." She sighed. "He still stays with us, but these days he spends most of his time as a panda. He doesn't like to talk about you."

Ranko nodded, a dark glare crossing her eyes. "The feeling's mutual. And... what about

you?”

Akane looked up, her eyes scanning the alley. *Relax, Akane! It's just Ranma. Why does this feel so different?* “Oh, you know, going to school. I'm on the volleyball team full-time now. Haven't lost a game yet!”

“Can't say as I'm surprised. You're pretty awesome like that.” Ranko swallowed hard with an audible *gulp*. She wasn't sure she wanted the answer to her next question, but she had to ask. “Are you, ya know, *seeing anybody?*”

Akane blushed deeply, shaking her head. “Naah. Not that Kuno isn't telling everybody we're getting married any day, now that *the evil Ranma Saotome* hasn't been around.”

The smaller girl rolled her eyes. “*Ugh*. Sorry about that. At least he isn't chasing the freakin' ***pigtailed girl*** around anymore.”

Akane could only imagine how that bastard would bleed to death from his nose if he knew just how much the *pigtailed girl* had blossomed since he saw her last. She chuckled at the thought of it. “And... what about you?”

Ranko blushed. “No way!” She hadn't seriously considered dating at all since she left. She wasn't sure if she was even supposed to, and when - and if - she ever did, if it would be okay if she were still interested in girls. She remembered Yui's story about Kimiko, and how terribly that had worked out. That said, if there was anyone Ranko could imagine being okay with such a thing, it was Hana.

She had tried - a few times, since the Phoenix Pill had been lost - to imagine what it would be like to date a boy, just to be seen as *normal*. Invariably, she'd ended up with nothing more than nausea at the very thought of it. So lost was Ranko in her thoughts that she hadn't even noticed Akane slip her hand into her own. Once she did, she fought the instinct to pull her hand away, instead smiling contently and resting her head on Akane's shoulder as Akane had done with hers a few moments before.

“Are you okay? You're shaking like a leaf.” Akane looked down at the girl leaning on her shoulder, concern in her eyes even as her cheeks flushed red.

“*Yeah. Just... it's really cold out here. And, seeing you, it's...*” Ranko sighed contentedly as Akane wrapped her arms around her, rubbing her back firmly through the yellow dress.

The moment was interrupted by the door popping open. Izumi stuck her head out from behind the door, hesitant to step out into the light snow in her thin satin dress. “Oi, Ranko! I don't know how long we can keep these - oh, hi! Who's ***this?***”

Ranko blushed, quickly pulling away from Akane and craning over her shoulder to look behind her. “Izumi! Uh, this is Akane. She's my f...”

Akane spoke over her. “Her ***friend.***”

Ranko looked up at Akane with surprise, receiving an *it's okay* glance in response. “Akane, this is Izumi. She's... well, it's a long story, but we work together, and we're essentially ***sisters*** now.” With a bit of a blush, she added, “She's also responsible for the majority of my wardrobe.”

Akane grinned at Ranko, making a point to slowly travel the length of the redhead's body with her eyes. "Then you do good work! Pleased to meet you, Izumi."

Izumi gave a knowing smirk, turning her eyes back to the redhead. "Seriously, though, they're getting restless out there, kiddo."

Ranko stood, brushing a few bits of gravel from the back of her dress. "I'm coming right now, Iz."

Izumi closed the door, and Ranko turned to face Akane. "I, *uhmm...* if you don't have anywhere to be and all, I, *ah...*" She looked down, fidgeting with her fingers. "I'd love it if you, ya know, maybe *stuck around for the show?* I mean, if you want. You don't hafta."

Akane beamed, wrapping both of her arms around the smaller girl's bicep again. "I wouldn't miss it for the world, **Ranko.**"

“Alright, kiddo, **spill it.**”

Ranko looked up from the dishwasher into Yui’s inquisitive face. “**What?!**”

Yui gestured with her head over the packed bar room of Friday revelers to the table closest to the stage and its lone occupant. “That girl. You haven’t stopped looking at her since the second she came in.”

Ranko’s skin spontaneously invented a new shade of red. “She, *umm*... I told ya, she’s a friend of mine, from before I came to the city.”

Yui bit her lip, pretending to go along with the explanation for the moment. “*Uh-huh.*” She walked to the other side of the redhead, ringing the sale of a pair of *Dragonfires* into the cash register for a duo of harbor workers still in their uniforms. “She’s **cute.**”

Ranko smiled dreamily. “Yeah, she... wait, **what?!**”

Yui giggled, a bright grin crossing her lips. “**Gotcha**, little sister.” She continued speaking over her sister’s voice, ignoring the redhead’s stammered protests. “You should go talk to her.”

The redhead’s cheeks still burned, and she turned her face away from the bartender to focus on the soda she was pouring for a customer at table eleven. “I did, before we opened.”

Yui shook her head, nudging Ranko’s shoulder with two fingers. “I think you know what I mean, blockhead.”

Ranko looked up, gasping and letting her jaw fall slack as she realized what Yui meant. “Naw. I couldn’t! She’s a **girl!**”

The blonde bartender nodded. “So?”

Ranko threw her hands up in the air in exasperation. “**I’m** a girl!”

Yui flashed her a little smile that was somewhere between wistful and devious. “**Soooo?**”

Ranko glanced over at Akane. The girl who had once been her betrothed was looking around the room, sipping her soda and just taking in the environment that had been Ranko’s home for the last few months. “I couldn’t do that to her. She deserves so much better than me.” She sighed, a downtrodden glaze falling over her eyes.

Yui clasped her hands on Ranko’s shoulders, physically turning the younger girl’s body until it faced her. “Listen to me. We’ve talked about this. **There is no better than you**, Ran-chan. You’re as good as they come, and if she deserves you, and she makes you happy, then don’t you **dare** miss the chance.” She looked down at the floor between her outstretched arms. “Trust me on this one.”

Ranko sighed, looking over at Akane again. *Even if I did want to be with her, there's way too much bullshit in the way. Our parents. The dojo. My new life here. Re-introducing all of the nonsense of everybody back home back into my life. We'd never find a way to make it work. It's just too much, and that's before you even get into the whole 'I'm a girl now' thing.*

As certain as she was that it was impossible, something inside her desperately wished it weren't. *What I'd give if we could just get past all the bullshit and just be two gi... two people, being together because we care about each other.*

The sound of a little service bell from the kitchen pierced Ranko's thoughts. As the redhead looked back toward the saloon door, Hana called out to her. "Ranko! The burgers for table eighteen are getting cold!"

Ranko snapped herself back into the present. *No time for daydreaming on a Friday night, dummy.* She rushed back, picking up the plates with a brief apology for Hana. Moving quickly to make up for her delay, she delivered the entrees to the designated table, putting on a stage smile as best she could. Ranko turned her head to gaze at Akane again, finding that she was no longer sitting alone, as Izumi had taken the chair opposite her. *What the hell is that all about? What are you up to, Izzi?*

"Excuse me, miss?"

Ranko whirled to face the customer at table seventeen who had summoned her. "Yeah?"

"Could we also get three more *Dragonfires* and a beer, when you get a minute?" The young woman grinned up at Ranko drunkenly.

The young server nodded with a smile. *Last round. After this, we're gonna have to cut her off. She's pretty far gone.* "Sure thing!"

Back at her table, Akane bit into a fried cheese stick. "So, how is she, **really?** When she isn't putting on a brave face for me and telling me everything is great?"

Izumi sighed. "When she got here, I'm not going to lie, she was pretty broken. All of us were at one point or another, when we first found this place. Thing is, this place is sort of equal parts nightclub and orphanage, in a weird sort of way. Me, Yui, Ayako, Mei, all of us girls had our reasons to end up here. Even our mama, the lady who owns the place. But because all of us have been broken over the years, we've learned how to put each other back together again. We've done our best to help Ranko out. There's a lot she still won't talk about - we suspect it's too painful for her - but we are here for her whenever she's ready."

Izumi sighed, stealing one of Akane's cheese sticks. "The poor kid's had it rough, though, even since she's been here. This is only her second night all the way back, after some jerk tried to force himself on her in the middle of the bar. She ended up hitting her head and getting a pretty nasty concussion."

Akane gasped. She sometimes had a hard time remembering that Ranko's condition severely hindered her ability to be the invincible martial artist she once was. She also dreaded Ranko - **any** girl, but especially someone who grew up as a guy - being in that position. *How terrifying it must have been for her, and how alone she must have felt, not being able to tell anyone the truth.*

Izumi continued. “But, she’s resilient. She’s trying so hard, and getting so much more confidence. She told us she was raised as a tomboy of sorts, because her father really wanted her to run his family business. Poor thing didn’t even know what bra size she wore. We’ve been trying to help her. She’s a quick study, but being a teenager, especially as a girl, is a lot when you don’t have someone in your life to help.”

Akane nodded knowingly - after her mother had died, she had no idea what she’d have done if it hadn’t been for Kasumi. “Has she talked about me at all?” There was a hopeful timbre in her voice.

Izumi frowned a little. “She doesn’t talk much about her past in general, and when she does, it’s usually kept pretty vague. About the only thing we’ve ever gotten out of her about people in her past, other than her parents, is that her father tried to make her get married – to more than one person, even.”

Akane sighed, her shoulders drooping. She’d often wondered, especially since Ranko had left her home, just how different their relationship might have been if Soun and Genma had just let things take their natural course.

“She also told us that because of all that pressure, she never had an opportunity to tell the person she really cared about how she felt.” Izumi bit into the cheese in her hand, pulling it away from her teeth until the strand of stretchy mozzarella finally broke.

Akane blinked, her eyes rocketing from her basket of fried cheese back to her brown-haired companion. *Could it be?! No. No way.*

“Anyway, all that is to say that she’s come a long way. She works hard, and she’s finding her footing in the world. We’re thrilled to have her in our little family, and we’re damn proud of her.” Izumi grinned up at the redhead darting between tables, balancing three baskets of chicken tenders on her forearm. She found it interesting that Ranko refused to carry warm dishes that way without first covering her arm with a bar towel, as if the teenager were afraid of being burned by food that wasn’t even too hot to bite into.

Akane smiled, looking across the room at the redhead in the yellow dress as she laughed with her customers, darting off to fetch three orange-and-yellow-tinged glasses with little wisps of smoke rising off of them on a cork board serving tray. “*So am I.*”



The music blaring from the sound system faded, and Mei’s voice took its place over the speakers. “Okay, everybody. We know what you’re really here for, so... **who’s ready?!**” The crowd roared enthusiastically.

Akane looked around, her eyes wide as she took in the scene. *Wow. I teased her about it, but... these people really are excited to see her. I’m glad. She deserves it.*

Izumi stood quickly from her chair. “That’s my cue! Gotta get ready. There’s always a huge rush at the bar after she sings. It was good talking to ya, Akane.”

Mei sighed vocally over the microphone in her hand. “Clearly, you guys haven’t had enough to drink yet! Loosen up! It’s Friday night! **I said, who’s READY?!**” The crowd cheered nearly twice as loudly as they had before, and this time, Akane joined in with them.

Ranko took a deep breath and let it out slowly through her mouth, her microphone clenched tightly in her trembling hand as she peeked out from the side door of the kitchen just behind the pool table. *I haven’t been nervous like this since the first time Mei made me get on stage, and I’m deluding myself if I pretend like I don’t know why. I’m gonna feel like such an idiot singing in front of Akane like this. Doing all the things I... normally do on stage. She’s just gonna laugh at me.* She glanced over at Akane’s table, her eyes filled with shame, but when she did, she found Akane on her feet, watching the stage, her hands clasped in front of her. She looked – **excited?**

Ranko took another deep breath. *Well, okay. Then I guess we’re doing this. This is my life now, she thought furtively. I hope you like it. I hope you accept it. But I can’t change it for anybody this time. I’ve worked too hard for it. This is who I am, Akane.* The first note of a high-energy Japanese pop song blared, despite the stage still standing empty. The crowd looked around, confused.

With a hard swallow, Ranko pushed through the door behind the pool table and jogged her way toward the stage, making a point to pass less than a meter from Akane as she made her way to the back corner of the bar room and stepped up onto the triangular wooden platform, switching her microphone on with her thumb as she ascended.

“Hey! **How’s everybody doing tonight?!**” She smiled widely, waving to the assembled revelers. A loud whoop came from every direction at once. “**Alright**, that’s what I like to hear! We having a good time? **I know I am!** Who’s with me?!” As the crowd roared, Ranko powered her voice into the first verse. She moved with an extra level of energy and an exuberance that infected the crowd immediately. Every snap of her hips and every note she sang seemed to be possessed of extra precision and purpose.

Mei leaned into Yui’s torso from behind the bar, watching the stage. As Yui was more than thirty centimeters taller, the top of her head came barely to Yui’s armpit. “What’s gotten into **her** tonight?”

Yui beamed, putting her arm around Mei’s shoulders and squeezing her from behind. “Mei, honey, I think our little sister’s **in love.**”

Ranko started the chorus, performing it call-and-answer style with the crowd. There wasn’t an eye in the building focused on anything but her. The louder the crowd got, the more energized she seemed to become, darting across the two-meter-wide stage with her head on a swivel to ensure different areas of the bar were engaged. She whipped her head around, catching a glimpse of Akane standing in front of her table, clapping her hands. *Holy crap! She actually looks like she’s enjoying herself!* Ranko smiled sweetly at her, pointing to her and wiggling her fingers in a cute wave as she sang.

Akane blushed, but didn’t seem to mind. Rather, she stood mesmerized, witnessing a transformation she could not begin to explain. The girl that commanded that tiny little stage was not the person Akane once had to beg to sing backup at last year’s Christmas party. Nor was it the broken husk of a person that came back from that mountaintop without a Phoenix Pill to show for their efforts. Nor was it the martial artist Akane once sparred against a few times a week, though some of the precise agility could be glimpsed in her dancing if

she looked hard enough. The singer could not have been the same person who begrudgingly accepted her feminine form when she had to or when there was benefit in it for her, and who had always seemed distant and sad even as a guy.

It couldn't be.

What Akane saw on that stage was, purely and simply, *joy*.

The song ended and the bar's patronage roared, but there was only one voice Ranko cared to hear. She turned to face Akane's table, but found it empty. Her brow furrowed in a disappointed frown. *Did she leave?* She bowed politely to the crowd and stepped down from the stage, and as soon as she did, Akane emerged from the throng and wrapped her arms around Ranko's waist in a tight hug. The singer giggled as Akane squeezed her tight and lifted her a little off the ground, just for a second, before setting her down and giving her enough space to make eye contact.

"You..." Akane shook her head in disbelief. "You are *incredible*. Just... *wow*."

Ranko blushed, averting her eyes a little, but unable to fully hide her thousand-watt smile. "*Aww, c'mon, Akane. You're embarrassin' me.*"

Akane clasped her hand on Ranko's shoulder, squeezing it gently. "No, I mean it! It's so good to see you doing something that makes you so happy."

The redhead smiled coyly. "I'm just happy you got to see it. I was so afraid you'd find me, but now that you did... I'm just really glad you came, Akane."

Akane grinned, her own cheeks reddening. "Me too."



After her fifth performance of the evening, Ranko stepped off the stage to again find an applauding Akane waiting for her at its edge. Ranko walked with her back toward her table, grinning playfully. "Now, time to get back to waitress mode. So, can I get you something to drink, *ma'am?*"

The girl in the Furinkan school uniform giggled as she slipped back into her chair. "Can you hang out for a minute?"

Ranko turned, scanning the bar room with her eyes and surveying her tables. Finding that Izumi was still covering them, she nodded. "I think so, yeah. Just for a few minutes, though. Nobody gets too many breaks on a Friday around here." She pulled out the chair across from Akane and sat, crossing her ankles reflexively.

Akane reached for the last mozzarella stick in the red plastic basket in front of her, spreading it apart with her fingers and offering half to the redhead across the table. "So, I've been meaning to ask you..."

Ranko nodded. “*Anything.*”

The raven-haired girl craned her neck, ensuring none of Ranko’s coworkers were within earshot. She lowered her voice, leaning across the table to be heard over the karaoke stylings of a drunken pharmacist who clearly thought he was Whitney Houston. “*When you gave them your name... you could have picked any name you wanted. Why **Tendo?***”

Ranko blushed brighter than she thought possible, looking down at her hands and picking at her fingernails. “*I... I think you know.*”

It was Akane’s turn to blush. “*I... well, uh, yeah. I, um... Oh, **shit!** Look at the time! I should probably get home! It’s really late.*”

Ranko shook her head, smiling softly. “It’s almost one o’clock, dummy. The trains stop at midnight.”

Akane looked at her watch, a panicked expression crossing her face. *Shit. Now what do I do?!* “Oh! Well, umm, I guess I’ll need to call a taxi or something.”

Ranko reached across the table for Akane’s hand. “Y... ya know, you could stay **here** tonight, if you want.”

Akane blinked in surprise. “You mean, with... **with you?!**”

Ranko bobbed her head, a bright smile forming on her lips and a hopeful glint sparking to life in her eyes as she felt Akane squeeze her hand in return. “I... I mean, only if you want. You don’t **gotta**, or nothin’.”

The girl in the school uniform nodded, her cheeks aflame.

“I’d... really like that, **Ranko.**”

