

Embers

BOOK 2

& ザ・ダツパー・ド

Phoenix
IGNITED

Anne Ominous



Phoenix
IGNITED

Embers
BOOK TWO

by
Anne Ominous

REIGNITED EDITION ~ FIRST PRINTING ~ 2025
NOT FOR SALE

FOR DIGITAL COPY AND BONUS MATERIALS:
<https://thephoenixsaga.com>

Akane groaned, sitting up in the narrow bed with a yawn and a huge stretch. She leaned back, resting her shoulders against the cold white metal of the headboard. She glanced around at her surroundings, finding herself in a largely unfamiliar little studio apartment. Sunlight streamed through the lone window just beyond the small white nightstand to her right. Her eyes fell to the purple down duvet cover her legs were still under, and then to the borrowed lime green nightshirt she was wearing.

Oh. Right. I spent the night at the bar, with...

She turned her eyes down to the floor on her right, the side closest to the kitchenette, spying Ranko's old bedroll laid flat on the floor. A lavender bed sheet lay crumpled on the floor off to one side of it, and one of the pillows from the bed rested atop it in a matching cotton pillowcase.

Akane couldn't help but shake her head and smile. After the pair had sat up talking for the better part of two hours the night before, catching up on Ranko's escapades in the bar business, Ranko had insisted that Akane take the bed, even though it was technically her apartment. *We're both girls; it would probably have been fine to share*, Akane thought as she stretched her legs a bit under the covers. *I wonder if she was just trying to be polite to a guest, or...* She blushed, able to think of only one other reason for such a gesture. *I mean, it couldn't be something like...*

Akane's thoughts were interrupted by the sound of a flushing toilet, and she turned to her left to identify the source of the noise. The bathroom door crammed into the corner of the little apartment opened, and Akane's former betrothed came through it into the main room of the apartment in a pale yellow nightdress with ruffles along the edges of the sleeves and hem. It was almost indecently short on the redhead's legs, owing to it having once belonged to the much-shorter Mei.

"Oh, hey, Akane! Morning! Sorry! I didn't wake you, did I?" Ranko blushed, lightly brushing the matted curtain of red hair out of her eyes with her fingers. "Not used to sharing a room with anybody anymore, I guess."

Akane smiled, crinkling her nose and shaking her head. "You're fine. What time is it?"

Ranko grinned in return, smoothing out her nightdress. "About ten thirty. It's pretty easy to sleep in when you live on bar hours." She bent down, picking up her sheet and pillow. As she did, her emerald green hipster panties came into full view under the poorly-fitting nightgown.

Wow, Akane thought, blushing and turning away. *Girls' underwear? She really is serious about this, I guess*. She hid her face behind her hand, cringing a little at the time. "I should... probably be getting home."

Ranko dropped the pillow on the bed at Akane's feet, balling up the sheet and

jamming it down into the yellow plastic laundry hamper. “Sure, if you want, I guess. But it was already pretty late when you called your dad and told him you’d be staying the night, so he’s probably not expecting you home super early anyway. If you wanna hang out a while longer, that is.” She knelt on the floor, beginning to roll her sleeping mat.

Biting her lip slightly, Akane nodded, trying not to notice her cheeks warming as the room’s other occupant bent over the bedroll on her hands and knees. “I probably shouldn’t stay too late, if that’s okay. I have a lot of homework and stuff to do this weekend.”

The redhead nodded in her disappointment as she buckled the last of the straps around her bedroll, rocking up from her knees to her bare feet. She opened the narrow closet door next to the bathroom door, tossing the cushion on the top shelf. “You hungry?”

Akane was surprised to see the number of dresses that hung in the closet. *Apparently last night’s outfit wasn’t a one-time thing, either. Who even are you anymore?* She blushed a little more, nodding as Ranko closed the closet door and turned to face her. “What did you have in mind? Anything good around here?”

Before Akane finished her sentence, Ranko had crossed the small room and her head was buried in her little refrigerator. She emerged momentarily with a handful of eggs, setting them gently on the counter of her little kitchenette and watching them for a moment to ensure they didn’t roll off.

“Wait, you...” Akane gestured to the ingredients being assembled on the counter. *Since when does she know how to cook? Did she actually pay attention to that ridiculous training Kasumi put her through?*

Ranko looked over her shoulder with a grin, her cheeks flushing a bit as well. “Yeah, yeah. I know. It’s new. Don’t get too excited; I’m not very good at it.” She filled a small rice cooker with a few scoops of dry rice and water, closing it and turning it on. The little device had been a lifesaver, as getting too close to boiling water given the Full-Body Cat Tongue - and the potential of a masculine body bursting out of her hand-me-down nightdress at the slightest splash - was not especially her favorite thing of late.

She poured a small quantity of sesame oil into a small skillet, turning the burner on and taking a step back while it heated. Normally, she would have opened the window to help keep the radiant heat from the small gas cooktop at bay, but she could feel the chill of the early December morning just walking past the double-paned glass, and she didn’t want to make Akane uncomfortable. “You sleep okay?”

Akane nodded, though Ranko didn’t see it while facing the cooking surface. “Yeah. This is a really cute little apartment. I kinda like it.” She motioned to a cheap canvas featuring a still life print of a pale pink vase full of orchids that hung in a white wooden frame over the headboard. “I’m guessing you didn’t do the decor.”

Bobbing her head in reply, Ranko shrunk back a bit shyly as her cheeks reddened even further. *Stop that, face! Sheesh!* “Yeah, it’s been great. Hana invited me to

stay here after my first shift at the bar. It's kinda been weird living alone, though. Before I left your place, I hadn't slept a night in ten years without havin' to listen to Pop snore."

Akane frowned a bit, not expecting to like the answer to her next question. "Where were you staying... *before that?*"

Ranko cracked an egg carefully into the skillet, the sizzle of the oil masking the sound of her sigh. Her shoulders slumped over the handle of the frying pan. "Oh, ya know. Here and there. Wherever I felt like crashing. Having all your stuff in one backpack does have its advantages."

The redhead may have hoped it would sound like an adventure, but Akane knew it was far more likely to have been a prolonged nightmare for her once-intended. *The poor thing, all alone, and... it's been so cold. She didn't even have a blanket. How did...*

"Ran..." Akane sighed and self-corrected before she could make a mistake. *Her new name is going to take some getting used to*, she reminded herself. *But I have to try.* "I'm... sorry you had to go through that for so long."

Ranko shook her head dismissively, nudging the egg in the skillet with a red plastic spatula to see if it was close to being ready. Seeing that it was not, she turned to face Akane. "Ahh, you don't need to be sorry for nothin', Akane. It was my choice to leave. I'm the dummy who ran off without a plan in the middle of the night. Yeah, it wasn't easy, but I'm glad I ended up where I am, even if I had to take the long way to get here." The rice cooker played a few cheerful digitized chimes as she finished her sentence, and she turned back to the counter.

"Can I help with anything?" Akane threw the duvet cover off of her legs, shivering a little as she swung her legs off of the bed. *Gods, with the Cat's Tongue, she must be freezing wearing that.*

A nervous chuckle came from the smaller girl as she darted around the tiny cookspace. "I, uh... I think I got it. Thanks, though!"

Nodding, the raven-haired girl stood from the bed, pulling the duvet cover back up and straightening the pillows against the headboard. *I guess she wants to wash the sheet.* "Have you thought about what comes next for you?"

Ranko cocked her head as she scooped half the rice from the rice cooker into a yellow plastic bowl and splashed it with soy sauce. "Whaddya mean?"

Turning her back to Ranko, Akane pulled the borrowed nightshirt off over her head and placed it in the hamper. She opened the closet, reaching for the hanger bearing the white shirt of her school uniform. *It was nice of her to hang this up after I fell asleep*, Akane thought with a soft smile over the sound of chopping on a wooden cutting board. *She must've remembered how easily it wrinkles.* "I mean, you can't be a waitress in a bar forever, can you? All of your plans have changed. Do you know what you want long-term?" She pulled her shirt from the hanger and slipped it on over her head, reaching for her teal pinafore.

Ranko added a small pat of butter to the bowl and then carefully lifted the fried egg from the skillet with the spatula, placing it atop the butter to help it melt. She chuckled as she used the side of the knife she'd chopped the scallions with to scoop them from the cutting board on the counter into the bowl. She wished she had some nori to add, but she hadn't been shopping since tagging along with Mei almost a week prior. *I guess she can't be too upset. It's not like I was expecting company, least of all...* "I'm still trying to figure out what I want **tomorrow**. All of this is still so new to me." Ranko picked up the bowl and laid a pair of red lacquered chopsticks over it, placing it on the little dinette table.

Akane finished dressing, made her way over to the small wooden table, and sat down in one of the two white pine chairs.

As she did, Ranko cracked another egg into the skillet, closing the rice cooker to keep its contents warm. "I'm honestly pretty shocked by the way all of this feels. I never thought I could be okay like this, and... I mean, it's still hard, every day. It still feels weird. Like, almost like a dream, but like, one of those super vivid ones you have, like, when you have a fever or something. But... I think it helps that Hana and the girls don't know about... ya know, **everything**." She gestured to her body. "So, they don't treat me like a guy in a girl's body, they just treat me normal, and I think it's helping me get used to it, too."

Akane nodded as Ranko filled the ceramic tea kettle with water and turned the burner under it on, waiting to pick up her chopsticks until her hostess could join her at the table. "Are you ever going to tell them? About Jusenkyo, I mean?"

Ranko turned, looking a little saddened by the thought. "I don't know. Part of me wants to, and part of me doesn't. I feel like I'm being dishonest by not telling them everything, but it feels so good to not be the weirdo for a change. And I..." She sighed heavily, letting her words trail off because she wasn't entirely sure how she wanted the sentence to end.

Her houseguest nodded in understanding. "You're afraid they'll think less of you if they find out, aren't you?"

Ranko nodded slowly. She turned to check her egg, and as she nudged it in the skillet, she heard the scrape of a wooden chair on the floor, followed by the feel of Akane's hand on her shoulder.

"*Hey*. It's going to be okay. You should have heard the way Izumi was talking about you. They seem to really care about you." Akane rubbed the redhead's back gently through the thin cotton nightdress.

Ranko gave another gentle sigh, shivering a little at Akane's soft touch on her ever-sensitive skin. Her whole body froze for a moment, and she stopped moving the spatula in her hand. *That feels so...*

"I... I *hope* so. I'm starting to feel like I'm a part of something here, and I'd pretty much given up hope of ever feeling like that. So, if it falls through now..." She turned her head, forcing her lips to smile between her neon red cheeks. "C'mon, your breakfast's gonna get cold."

Akane smiled brightly, catching the hint. **“Right!** It smells great!” She returned to her seat as Ranko finished composing her own bowl and carried her breakfast and the whistling tea kettle to the table. She felt a momentarily twinge of jealousy with the first bite of her breakfast. *How dare she, having basically never cooked before, be so much better at it than me?!* Akane did her best to swallow the feelings and the food at the same time, putting on a bright smile. “It’s really good! Thanks!”

Ranko blushed. “I’m glad, because I’m pretty sure almost made chickens go extinct with all the eggs I burned before I got it right.” She lifted a bit of rice and a sliver of egg white to her lips with her chopsticks.

The elder girl giggled, pouring the hot water from the white ceramic kettle into the waiting black teapot. *Somehow, I’m guessing she’d prefer not to handle boiling water these days.* “When do you start work?”

Ranko rolled her chopsticks in the air in a *just a second* gesture as she finished chewing, swallowing her food before speaking. “Noon, usually, but I let the girls know I might be down a little later today since you’re here.”

So much about her is different. She doesn’t talk with her mouth full. She doesn’t eat like she thinks somebody’s gonna take her bowl away. She... smiles. She’s like a whole new person. Akane shook her head, looking away as her cheeks flushed. “Oh, don’t be late because of me. I don’t wanna get you in trouble. I can find my way to the train station on my own.”

Ranko nodded and swallowed her last bite of egg, a gentle smile crossing her lips at the sight of Akane’s reddening cheeks. “If you’re sure.” She had to admit, there was a part of her that wished Akane would stay, but she knew that every moment her old and new worlds continued to intersect had tremendous potential for disaster. *Still, is this what it’s like, being a couple? Waking up, making breakfast, talking about your plans for the day? Nobody fighting over the last rice ball? Nobody getting tossed in the pond? Nobody getting cracked over the head with the dining table? It feels... normal. It feels nice.* Realizing she was allowing herself to think of herself and Akane as a **couple**, Ranko blushed furiously as well. *Don’t be stupid, Ranko. It could never happen. Not now. Not anymore.*

Akane stood, picking up both empty bowls and teacups and flashing a warm smile at the seated redhead. “Thanks again for breakfast, Ranko.”

Her hostess rocketed to her feet, almost knocking her chair over to the floor in her hurry. “I can get that, Akane! You’re a guest.”

Akane waved the redhead off as she set the items in the sink and turned the faucet on. “Oh, come on. You cooked; I can do this. Besides, you still gotta get dressed.”

Ranko looked down at herself, blushing further still. She’d almost forgotten what she was wearing. She was getting used to dressing more femininely, but around Akane, she felt some of her old embarrassment creeping into her mind. *Is it because I don’t want her seeing me as a girl, or because I...*

“Yeah, you’re right, I guess. Thanks.” The redhead walked to her closet, opening it

and searching in vain for one of her more androgynous outfits. *I gotta stop waiting until the last minute to do laundry*, she thought with a sigh.

Akane glanced over her companion's shoulder as she placed a teacup in the white plastic rack suspended over the sink to dry. "I like the white one."

Shit, Ranko thought, leaning on the white-painted wooden frame of the closet door. *I'm getting dizzy from all of my blood being in my freakin' face at the same time*. She glanced up at the floral lace dress she had worn on her birthday, when Izumi took her shopping. *That's... not exactly what I had in mind*. Her voice crept up an octave as she squeaked out a quiet "**Yeah?**"

Akane nodded, dropping the newly-cleaned spatula in the dish draining rack. "Yeah! It's super cute!"

Ranko pulled the lace dress she'd worn on her birthday out of the closet tentatively. "If you think so." *Not sure if Akane's just issuing a challenge to see if I'm willing to wear stuff like that in front of her, or if she really does like it*, she mused. Either way, the decision was made. She turned her back to the kitchenette, pulling her nightdress over her head and tossing it into the hamper atop the lavender bed sheet and the nightshirt Akane had borrowed. She reached up to the single wooden shelf at the top of the closet, past her bedroll, for her black bra. Before she pulled it out, though, she paused and reconsidered her decision. *Izumi said dark colors look bad when ya wear 'em under light-colored outfits. I swear, it's gotta be easier to fly a space shuttle than dress like a girl*. She pulled out her white bra instead, shaking her head and rolling her eyes.

Akane turned to say something, but stopped mid-inhale once she saw Ranko was changing. She snapped her head back to the sink, her cheeks aflame. *I didn't mean to peek! Crap!* Since she had in fact peeked nonetheless, she couldn't stop herself from feeling a little surprised at the fact that Ranko was wearing bras of her own volition.

Ranko slipped the dress on, pulling the zipper up. "There, how's that?"

Akane put the last bowl in the dish drainer, turning slowly. She still felt a bit lightheaded. Her eyes and smile both widened at the sight of the redhead. "Wow... that... **really** is pretty on you."

The redhead's face instantly warmed enough to boil another kettle of water. She didn't know if Akane calling her **pretty** made her want to smile with pride, or hide under the bed. Maybe a little of both. "*Thanks,*" Ranko squeaked nervously.

It was still so weird to her how much people paid attention to what girls wore. As a guy, she'd worn the same shirt and pants almost every day and no one seemed to care, but when she dressed like a girl, she felt like she was always on a judging stand to be rated by everybody. She couldn't deny that she was starting to enjoy the compliments when she got them, but the whole practice felt a little invasive to her. Still, getting any sort of affirmation from Akane was a treat, and she appreciated it.

Akane beamed at the young redhead in white. *Gods, she really is... cute*. Back at

home, whenever Ranma had dressed up as a girl, it always used to infuriate Akane. In her mind, Ranma was making a mockery of their engagement – and of **her** – and the constant reminders that Ranma’s feminine form was better built than Akane’s didn’t help matters much. Until the night before, Akane had never given her once-betrothed the satisfaction of admitting that she agreed with the redhead’s assessment that she was the prettier girl. But now, the sight of the beaming redhead in the white lace dress pocked with embroidered roses brought a legitimate smile to her lips. For a split second, she imagined what it would be like to see Ranko in a wedding dress, before the blood flow to her face flooded the thought from her mind as quickly as it had come.

Finishing brushing her hair in the bathroom mirror, Ranko scooped her loose tresses back over her ear. She fastened the white bow clip Izumi had given her on her birthday into her hair to keep it out of her eyes, beaming at herself in the mirror. Izumi had given her a small makeup kit, too, but she hadn’t yet felt brave enough to even try and dig into it, and she certainly wasn’t feeling brave enough to take it for its maiden voyage in front of Akane. “There. Presentable enough, I guess,” she called through the open bathroom door.

Akane laughed loudly. *“I’ll say.”*

Gods, she is so pretty. It’s not even fair...

“You, uh, about ready to head downstairs?” Akane looked around at the room for the thermostat; she hadn’t seen Ranko adjust it, but it definitely felt warmer in the apartment than it had a few moments ago.

Ranko nodded with a smile and reached for the little purse hanging from the closet door knob. “Do you need cash for the bus or anything?”

The elder girl shook her head. “Considering I’m taking a train? I’m fine, but thanks.”

Laughing at her mistake, Ranko slipped on her black flats and opened the door, beginning to make her way down the steps with Akane following close behind. The pair emerged into the hallway joining the bar to the kitchen, and Ranko turned left, leading Akane into the main bar area.

There, they found Yui already slicing oranges for the night’s service. “Oi! Morning, Ranko! Akane, **good to see you.**” She wore an absolutely devious grin that made both of the younger girls blush again.

“Hey, Yui,” Ranko replied flatly as she held the blue wooden door open for Akane. “Wipe that smirk off your face. I know what you’re thinking.”

Akane could only wave, almost facefaulting at the implied insinuation. *Does she think that we actually...*

Ranko led Akane to the glass double doors at the front of the bar, resting her hand on its brass bar handle. “It really **was** good to see you, Akane. Thank you for coming. And, you know, **not killing me.**”

Her guest chuckled, shaking her head. "You're welcome. It was nice to see you, too. **Really** nice. I'll come back again soon?"

The redhead nodded with a bright smile. She seemed to grow three centimeters as her posture straightened in excitement and hope, her eyes sparkling like a puppy that had just been promised a treat. "I'd **really** like that!"

"Sounds good. See you soon, **Ranko!** Bye, Yui!" Akane waved, wiggling her fingers as she pushed through the door into the street.

Ranko turned toward the interior of the bar, resting the back of her head on the glass door with a happy sigh and a smile that outshone the nearly noonday sun on the sidewalk beyond.

Ranko walked back toward the kitchen door, playing with the skirt of her white dress in her fingers. She felt like she was floating on air.

She had one foot in the hallway leading to the kitchen when Yui reached out with her left hand, grabbing the blue saloon door and holding it fast to prevent it from swinging further inward. “Nuh-uh. Don’t you dare, missy. Sit. **Spill**. I want to know **everything**.” She grinned, gesturing in a mock threat with the knife in her hand before setting it to work on an orange.

Ranko stepped on the brass footrest and climbed up onto the brown vinyl seat of the barstool opposite her sister’s workstation. As she turned her backside to the seat, she remembered at the last moment to be mindful of her skirt. *Dresses are such a pain in the ass, man*. “There’s not much to tell. Nothing **happened**. We slept, we talked, we had breakfast, she left. She’s just a friend, Yui.”

Yui gave a disbelieving smirk, tossing a bifurcated orange into the plastic container waiting nearby. “Uh-huh. **Sure** she is.”

Ranko blushed deeply, recoiling a little from a squirt of juice that spritzed her cheek when Yui sliced into another fruit. She reached out to the bin on the other side of Yui’s workspace for a lemon, picking up the knife Yui slid across the counter to her. **“What?! She is!”**

The blonde nodded, an amused chuckle breaking through her attempt to pull off a serious response. “Okay, Ranko. She’s just a friend, and I’m the emperor’s daughter.”

Her youngest sister sighed as she pushed through a lemon with her paring knife, a sad reality reintroducing itself after a blissful few hours’ respite. She could not muster a reply.

Yui frowned, reaching out for Ranko’s right wrist between slices to get her attention. “Hey. We talked about this, kiddo. If you like her, you’ve gotta **tell her**.”

Ranko shook her head in exasperation. “Even if I did like her like that - **and I’m not saying I do!** - it wouldn’t matter. She doesn’t like **girls**. Plus, her father is super traditional about these kinds of things. He’d never tolerate it. And, honestly, I’m not sure how I’d feel about it, either.” Of course, the idea of being a girl and dating a girl was a lot more appealing to her than being a girl and dating a guy. The thought of a **boyfriend** made her skin crawl.

That was part of the reason I had to get the hell away from Pop, before he got the bright idea that if I wasn’t gonna be able to change back, he could sell me off to somebody as their... She shuddered at the very thought of it. With my luck, it’d be Kuno, or like, some snooty rich French dude or something. He’d have stuffed my

ass in a wedding dress and sold me into slavery in a fucking second, and never thought twice about it.

“Maybe it’s better if I don’t date anybody at all,” Ranko mused darkly, the fried egg she’d made for breakfast suddenly not sitting as well in her stomach as she might have liked.

Yui nodded sadly, fingering her sleeves and remembering her lost Kimiko. “I get feeling like that. Believe me, I do. I haven’t been on a date in... shit, almost ten years now? I know you’ve gotta be careful about these things, especially around old-fashioned jerks. But I also know that you lit up like a Christmas tree when you saw her, whether you want to admit it or not, and I’d hate to see you ignore that.”

Ranko nodded distantly, lost in her own thoughts.

What if Mr. Tendo did allow it? Nabiki could still marry someone to take over the school, right? I mean, Kasumi’s all but certain to end up with Dr. Tofu. I don’t envy anyone showing up at his office if that happens, though. Damn. My neck still hurts sometimes just thinking about it. But it would never work. Nabiki isn’t half as devoted to martial arts as Akane is. I only saw her practice a handful of times the whole time I lived there - and besides, the whole point of the engagement was to merge the schools as well as the families. Under the circumstances, that ain’t happening now.

Plus, if I ended up with Akane, I’d be expected to go back to the dojo, and that would mean all the drama of that world again, and leaving... everything good I’m building here. I can only imagine what Pop would say if he saw me now, wearing a cute white dress with a bow in my hair for no reason other than wanting to look pretty for Akane. Her cheeks flushed brightly at the realization that impressing Akane had, in fact, been the motivation for her current attire. There’d be yelling, pouting, a healthy dose of shame and dishonor talk, and somebody would probably be taking a one-way flight into the koi pond. No thanks. Compared to that, living as a pop idol and Izumi’s personal freakin’ Barbie doll sounds like a freakin’ cakewalk.

A quiet smirk crossed her lips for just the briefest of moments. *Oh, what I’d give to put Mama and Pop in a room together for five fucking minutes, though. Whoo. Not enough popcorn in the freakin’ universe for that shit.*

But, me and Akane? It would never work. Be real, Ranko. We managed to pull off being friendly for a few hours, but if we got together long-term, it would only be a matter of time before we’d be back to arguments and hammers, calling each other un-cute, and all of that shit. Everybody else would be all up in our lives, and all the friggin’ circus freaks around with the Kunos and Ryoga and everybody else around there would never let us live in peace. If the shit really hit the fan, Akane couldn’t cut her family out of her life and haul ass as easily as I did.

More importantly, Akane deserves better than being ridiculed for being with a girl, and the only way to protect her from that would be to keep a relationship quiet. I’ve spent long enough hiding who I am and holding my breath around a mountain of secrets, and I wouldn’t wish that on anyone, especially Akane.

Besides, how could she take care of someone else? She was already living off

Hana's charity, and not making nearly enough to support herself, let alone two people. She had no marketable skills and hadn't even finished high school. Her nonexistent pain tolerance – courtesy of Koh Lon – had ended any hope of a career in martial arts, and Akane was right: she had no backup plan to speak of. On the other hand, she wouldn't necessarily be held to the responsibilities of being *the guy* in the relationship, because she **wasn't** anymore. But would Akane see it that way? Worse, could she really stand the thought of Akane being the breadwinner in the relationship while Ranko waited tables, or worse still, became a **homemaker**? Dressing and acting like a *proper girl* was hard enough for her to figure out, but turning into *Kasumi* was several bridges too far.

*No, it's too late. I had my chance, and I missed it. I ran away from it. But... it was **Ranma** that screwed everything up with her, and Ranma isn't here anymore. Maybe things could be dif...*

"Hey..." Yui waved her hand in front of the redhead's face. "**Earth to Ranko.** You still with me over there, kiddo?"

Ranko blushed, snapping out of her thoughts. She reached for the paring knife she'd left on the countertop, shaking her head. *C'mon, airhead. Get with it. You're supposed to be working.* "Yeah, sorry. Just daydreaming, I guess."

The blonde smirked softly, giving her sister an understanding nod. "Cute girls can have that effect on us sometimes."

Saddened though she was, Ranko couldn't help laughing, and Yui joined her.

"You gonna see her again?" Yui asked hopefully, popping a wedge of orange into her mouth and wiping the juice off on the hips of her blue jeans.

For all the good it'll do. Still, just getting to hang out with her again after all this time... Ranko shrunk a bit on her stool, biting her lower lip, but she smiled through it and gave an excited little nod.

Yui grinned, tossing another orange into the garnish bin. "Atta **girl!** Talk to Iz, and she'll get you set up with the *perfect* date outf..."

With a crash, the front door swung open and Izumi burst into the room. She wore a tan knee-length skirt under a jewel-tone green turtleneck sweater. She wore no makeup, an almost uncanny sight on the perpetually fashion-conscious brunette. An absolutely frenzied expression painted her face as she rushed toward her sisters.

Ranko breathed a sigh of relief at no longer being the center of attention. "Uhhh, Izzi? You okay, sis? **Little** too much coffee this morning?" She made a pinching gesture with her fingers.

Ignoring Yui's laughter, Izumi darted to the bar counter and mounted the stool to Ranko's right, shaking her head wildly. "**No! You guys!** You're not gonna believe it!" She waved her left hand frantically, and a glint of light caught something on one of her fingers. "Kaito asked me to **marry him!**"

“What?!” Yui dropped the knife in her hand, letting it clatter to rest on the cutting board. “Oh, Izzi! Honey! That’s amazing! Give it here! Let me see!” Yui took her sister’s hand, manipulating it every which way to examine the modest silver setting and solitaire diamond that adorned Izumi’s left ring finger.

*Glad that at least **somebody’s** gonna get their happily ever after.* Ranko smiled brightly, trying to wash the jealousy from her eyes before lifting them from her sister’s hand. “Izumi, I’m so happy for you both. And Hoshi, too!”

Izumi giggled as Yui fawned over her ring. “We haven’t even told Hoshi yet. We’re gonna do it over dinner tonight. But... I can’t **believe** it, girls! I’m freakin’ getting **married!** We decided on a Western-style wedding, just like the one that princess in England had a few years back. My gods, I’m gonna need a dress, and flowers, and a cake, and...” Her words quickly trailed into a hysterical screech of excitement.

Yui squeezed her hand. “Breathe, Izzi. You’ve got time. You don’t need to do all this in one day. And it’s not like you won’t have backup.”

The bride-to-be gasped, pulling her hand back and clasping it on her cheeks along with its mate. **“Ohmygods,** you’re right! I’m gonna need everybody’s help! You girls are gonna be my bridesmaids, right?”

Yui smiled warmly, patting the back of her hand. “Of course we will!”

Ranko chuckled, shaking her head as she picked her knife back up. “That’s gonna be a freakin’ huge wedding, with three bridesmaids.”

Izumi turned her head to face the redhead. **“Four.** Can’t you count, dummy?”

Ranko cocked her head. “How do you figure? You’ve got Ayako, Yui, Mei, and... **waaaaaaait a minute,** you don’t mean...”

Izumi nodded emphatically. “Of course I do! I want all **four** of my sisters to stand with me.”

So much blood rushed to Ranko’s face that the resultant lightheadedness rocked her back on her stool. “I... I don’t know what to say.” She meant it. All she knew about the act of being a bridesmaid was that it involved a whole lot of primping and dressing up. *I’m still getting the hang of fastening a bra. I’m nowhere near prepared for this shit. You must be crazy, Izzi!*

Izumi grinned, throwing her arm over her redheaded sister’s shoulders and pulling her across the gap between their stools into a side hug. “You say **yes,** blockhead.”

Ranko exhaled with intimidation. She knew that the pressure to look and behave as a perfect lady, especially in a Western-culture ceremony about which she knew practically nothing, would be staggering. *What if I embarrass Izumi on her wedding day? What if I use the wrong fancy fork or something, and somehow dishonor Izumi in front of Kaito or his family? I have no fucking idea what would be expected or what I’m supposed to do. Just, like, stand there with flowers and smile? Try not to fall on my face in heels?*

She was terrified, but then again, leaning into the new and strange had been working for her so far. As she contemplated her response, she looked down at the dress Akane picked for her, and her mind slowed from a thousand simultaneous thoughts to just one. *If she was flustered seeing me in this*, she mused, fingering the embroidered roses of her skirt, *then how would she react to...*

The sound fell out of her mouth before she could finish her thought.

“Yes.”

Akane stared forward blankly, idly fiddling with the black plastic band of the Casio digital watch she wore on her left wrist. Her mind raced with a flurry of new realities. Not only had she learned, after months of worry, that *Ranma* was alive, but that he - *she*, Akane reminded herself - was actually **thriving!**

When she had last seen the person she now knew as Ranko, that night at the dojo, her once-betrothed was so depressed at the idea of having to live life as a woman that Akane had legitimately feared for Ranko's life. So many nights since, Akane had looked up at the stars out of her second-story bedroom window and prayed that she was safe, both from any number of attackers who could have preyed upon the vulnerability presented by the Full-Body Cat's Tongue, and from the very real threat that a despondent and hopeless martial artist could have posed to *herself*. That somehow, some way, the person with whom Akane's destiny had once been entwined could find a way to make peace with the new circumstances she had found herself living with.

And yet, after all of that, when Nabiki had finally found her by random chance, it had been with pierced ears, painted nails and a closet full of dresses, singing onstage for strangers! Calling herself *sister* to people who had been strangers a month ago! And somehow, she was **happy about it!** It was all almost beyond Akane's comprehension.

Akane looked up, just for a moment, as she felt the brakes of the bus release with a loud *hiss*. The vehicle lurched forward, direly in need of maintenance as it was, but Akane was already lost in her thoughts again. She barely reacted in time to pull her knee out of the aisle and allow the pair of twenty-somethings in business skirt suits that had boarded at the Shinjuku stop to pass. "Sorry," she muttered, wincing as the woman in front nearly fell forward with the sudden jerk of the bus' automatic transmission.

*What am I gonna say when I get home? I can't tell anyone at home about Ranm – Ranko! Shit. I gotta remember to be careful and keep that straight. Nabiki said it really hurt her when she messed up and used the old name. Only Nabiki and I know where she is, and Ranko made it abundantly clear that she didn't want anybody else to find out about her. Our fathers and Happosai are **definitely** out, and nothing good will come of it if the Kunos or Ryoga or any of those people figure out where she is. That's the last thing she needs right now, when she's trying to get established with a whole new identity.*

I mean, maybe I could trust Kasumi with it. Then again, Kasumi kind of sucks at keeping secrets. She doesn't mean to, she's just too kind-hearted to be able to convincingly lie. If she finds out, she'll spill the beans to Dad within a week.

No, I think I've gotta go with the 'nugget of truth' approach here. I went to visit a girl I went to Furinkan with last year, who moved to Tokyo before the start of the new

school term. I gotta come up with a name to give in case they ask questions. Ranko is too close, and they might guess. Can't take the chance. Maybe... Yoiko? Akane smirked, chuckling quietly to herself as she watched the Shibuya skyline whiz by the window to her right. No, *That's silly. Nobody would name a girl that. If she were a puppy, maybe. How about... Rima? That could work, I guess. I don't know. It's really pretty, but it's kind of close to Ranma, too.* She grinned at her faint reflection in the bus window as the vehicle zoomed past a towering red sign for a restaurant situated just off the highway. *Aiko's Teppanyaki House. Perfect! Aiko it is!*

Akane rolled her eyes, glancing down at her wristwatch. *I imagine that this is the same sort of delicate dancing around the truth Ranko has to do every day, now that she's got people involved in her new life, asking questions and stuff. It's definitely not easy. I don't envy her one bit for it.*

What about Ukyo? Maybe I should tell her. I know she's been super worried, too. Ranm... fuck! Did it again! Ranko said Ukyo gave her some money when she ran, and never said anything about it to me or anybody else. So, maybe she could be cool, if she knew. But, then again, Ukyo also wasn't much better than Xian Pu and Kodachi and...

She winced, shaking her head sadly as her mind returned to the intrusive thought that had festered in her mind on repeat since the night fate had chased Ranma from her home, and from her life.

I wasn't any better. I was cruel, too. All of us girls were so focused on what we wanted with Ranko that nobody ever really even thought to ask her. Nobody gave her a chance to speak for herself. Those other girls, they all had their reasons for the things they did, but I should have been different. I should have been the one to take her side. I should have been the one she could count on.

At least now, however weird her new situation is, it seems like Ranko's getting to make her own decisions. Maybe that's part of the reason she seems so much happier. So, I don't know if Ranko would even want Ukyo to know. I can't take the risk - however small - that I'd mess up a good thing for her now that she finally has a life she's proud of.

Akane braced her knee against the seat in front of her as the bus hit a bump in the road, rocking it forward a bit.

And her new life! Wow. Working in a freaking bar, with three other girls that call her their sister? Akane smiled, remembering Ranko's excited retelling of her first interactions with the other women who called the Phoenix home. No, four! I forgot, there's the oldest one, that Ranko said doesn't work there anymore. Ayako, I think she said her name was?

She grinned brightly, remembering her brief introduction to the older woman who ran the bar. *Hana. She was really nice, too. Didn't even charge me for my food.* Akane sighed, beaming as she recalled the abject reverence in Ranko's eyes whenever she looked at the bar's proprietress - the one her once-betrothed called *Mama*.

Gods, Ranko, it's so good to think of you finally getting to have a mother figure in your life - at least, one that's more than two years older than you. You deserve it. I wonder how much easier it would've made... everything you've been through since Jusenkyo.

“Nakano Station, now arriving,” came the driver’s announcement through the crackly public-address speakers positioned throughout the bus. “If this is your destination, please gather your belongings and exit through the doors at the center of the bus. If not, please clear the aisles to make room for boarding and disembarking passengers. Thank you.”

Akane looked up as the bus shuddered to a stop. Her cheeks flushed as a young woman with a bright pink shock of hair passed her in a flowy white sundress and a matching wide-brimmed hat despite the chill of that early afternoon in December. For the briefest of moments, she thought it might have been the beautiful redhead she'd left in an empty bar room in Minato, having thought better of letting her go home alone. She sighed softly at the thought.

Everything about her is so different now. Is it even still the same person I used to know?! I mean, she sings! In public, for strangers, multiple times a night! Like, without having to be threatened!

And, like, there wasn't that cocky, alpha-male jerk attitude anymore. The confidence is still there, I think, but there's a timidity, a shyness, behind it now that I never saw before. She was... kind. She was sweet, and considerate. Maybe she learned better while she was on her own. While she was...

Akane frowned, a sadder sigh escaping her lips. *While she was homeless and alone. I hate that she went through that. Nobody should ever have to... She must have been so scared. I hate that she didn't feel like she could stay with m... with us. But, before she left, she was so sad. So desperate.*

Even before the whole thing with the Cat's Tongue and the Phoenix Pill, I guess she was always a little disconnected. She never really seemed comfortable in her own skin, even when she was in boy mode. If I had to guess, I'd say it probably started about the time a certain cursed spring in China gave her the skin she's wearing now. I tried to reach out to her, but she always kept me, and everyone, at arm's length. She didn't ever really want to talk about her feelings. After having spent so much of her childhood traveling alone with the father of the century that Mr. Saotome was, I doubt she ever really learned how.

*Maybe she would have stayed with us, if I could have found a way to be more supportive. If she didn't feel like she was going through everything all alone. I tried, but I just didn't know how to get close to her. It always got so awkward and weird, and I'd get to feeling things, and one of us would get flustered, and she'd say something rude, and I'd just... hit her, or yell at her, or storm off in a huff. I wish I could have been better at talking about stuff with her. She wasn't blameless either, but... Akane scoffed slightly under her breath. *We both really suck at this, don't we, Ranko?**

Of course, it was nothing Akane hadn't thought a hundred times, in the months

since her erstwhile betrothed had fled their home in the middle of the night. *All the conversations I wish I could take back. All the things I should have said differently, or not said at all. All the times I should have just shut up and... listened. And not stopped listening until she said what she needed to say.*

Thinking about it now, I'm glad she left when she did. If she'd have stayed in that dark place she was in after she lost the Phoenix Pill, with Dad and Mr. Saotome and everybody always talking about her like there was something wrong with her that would never be fixed, who knows what would have happened. Nobody could live like that forever. Besides, she'd never have had a chance to build a new life while she was still surrounded by the ruins of her old one. I hate that it was necessary for her, but it likely was. I don't have to like it to understand it.

With another loud *hiss*, the brakes released and the bus resumed motion, quickly merging back onto Tokyo Metropolitan Road Route 318.

But, what am I gonna do now, Akane wondered. Now that I know where she is? Now that I know she's okay? I had a plan. I rehearsed it in my head all day. I was gonna go over there after school, and see her one last time. Just see with my own eyes that she's alive and kicking, so I could sleep at night, and say my goodbyes. I was gonna tear her a new asshole for storming out on us like that, and throw every single mean and scary thing I've thought for the last two months in her face and make her choke on it.

I could tell that's what she thought was gonna happen, too, given how scared she looked when she first saw me in the alley. I guess she thought I was hiding back there waiting to ambush her. I didn't have the guts to tell her I was just sitting there trying to work up the courage to walk in the front door and see her again after all that time.

Of course, my brilliant plan lasted until the moment I saw her face, and then, all I could do was smile like a big goofy idiot. Nothing else mattered anymore, and I felt stupid for thinking it ever did. I just wanted to give that great big dummy a hug and tell her I was relieved she was okay, and that she's finally starting to find something approaching happiness for once in her life.

And she was so sweet to me last night. The way she looked after me all night while she was working, letting me have the bed, making me breakfast this morning... Akane smiled as she thought of the way it had felt to be taken care of in that way by her former partner, even if it had been something as simple as a fried egg and a bowl of rice.

I always figured, if we ended up together, I'd have to do all the domestic stuff. That's what Kasumi was always saying, anyway. Like, I was the girl, and so I was the one that had to master cooking and cleaning and all of that crap, whether I'm any good at it or not, and I'd never pull off being in a relationship until I figured it out. She could have done bridal training with me until I was sixty, and I probably still wouldn't be able to fry a fish filet worth a damn. Poor Ranko, she got sick so many times off of crap I fed her, but even when she complained, she always tried it. She knew how scared I was that nobody would ever want me because I wasn't cut out for all of that homemaker shit. But, there was so much pressure to get it right, so I kept trying,

and I got so mad and frustrated when it went to hell every time.

And... I saw it as the pressure was all happening because I was engaged... and so, I took it out on the person I was engaged to. As if she asked for the engagement any more than I did.

*Gods... I took **so much** out on her.*

*Forget how much I had to forgive when I saw her last night. How could she ever... forgive **me**?*

Akane shook her head, her shoulders slumping as she crumpled to her right in her seat and curled up against the sidewall of the bus. She grimaced, inhaling sharply through her gritted teeth as the metal armrest jabbed into her ribs through her teal Furinkan pinafore.

*She'd never. Not all the way. Not enough to... Her eyes widened and her breath caught in her throat as she realized what she was considering. **Am I actually thinking about... with her? With... a girl?! I... I couldn't! Not in a million years! I just couldn't...***

... could I?

Besides, there's no way Ranko feels that way about me. Not after everything that's happened between us. I mean, hell, she barely understands herself right now, let alone being in a position to be in a relationship with anybody else. I can't even dare suggest it. I'd just look like a total freaking idiot. I'd embarrass us both. All she wants in the world is for her life to get simpler, and here's me rolling into her life unannounced with my big dumb idea that's way too little, way too late. The last thing she needs is that complexity in her world right now when she's still trying so hard to figure herself out.

But then... what the heck am I gonna do? I can't just... not go back. I promised her I would, and she looked so happy when I did. Maybe it's best to just pretend I don't feel anything. Keep my mouth shut. Ignore it until it goes away. It's a silly, stupid thought anyway. There's no way it could work. She's a girl now. It's wrong.

But then why does it feel so...

I mean, she's still got all the things I liked about Ranma before. She's still strong, and brave, and loyal. She's determined and she's fierce. But, she's softer now, too. Kinder. Sweeter. Happier. All the stuff that made me want to punt Ranma into the sun is just... gone, and in its place...

The raven-haired girl beamed, remembering every detail of the young woman she shared a bedroom with the night before as if she had been someone Akane had met for the first time, and not at all the same person her father had forced into an engagement with nearly two years ago. Remembering how she moved in that adorable white lace dress. Remembering how her pulse quickened when Ranko bent over to roll up her sleeping mat and Akane had caught a glimpse of her underwear. Remembering the way Ranko's eyes brightened at the sight of Akane's

smile when she clipped that lace bow in her hair.

The high schooler rested her temple against the cold glass of the bus window. She bit her lower lip as she realized that her cheeks were likely warm enough to melt away the fog forming on its outer surface.

The way she smiles now. Gods... She was...

Her introspection was interrupted by a tinny, crackly chime emitted from the public address speakers overhead.

“Nerima Station, now arriving. If this is your stop, please gather your belongings and exit through the doors at the center of the bus. If not, please clear the aisles of your personal effects to clear the way for boarding and disembarking passengers. Thank you for riding with us, and have a pleasant rest of your day.”

The brakes gave a loud, shrill squeak as the dilapidated bus jerked to a stop. Akane stood, smiling shyly at her flushed reflection in the frosted-over window pane.

She was... perfect.

Ranko bowed, her cheeks aglow with an enthusiastic smile. The patrons filling the bar still cheered as the last note of a Japanese pop song faded from the air.

“Thanks, everybody!” She waved excitedly from the stage, taking advantage of her elevated position to survey the tables for anyone who needed her attention. “I’ll be around in just a second to check on you all!”

A few of her regulars waved back to her from their seats. They’d quickly become accustomed to the routine in the last few weeks, whereby their table service was occasionally unavailable for a few minutes on account of her needing to go croon a love ballad on the bar’s tiny corner stage. The bar’s staff had settled into a routine in which, on busy nights where the full complement was on shift, Ranko would cover the half of the tables closest to the stage, and Mei the far half nearer to the front door. That left Yui to run the main bar for people who walked up to buy a drink, Izumi behind the service bar crafting cocktails for Ranko and Mei to deliver to the tables, and Hana running the kitchen. As it was late in the evening, food orders had dwindled, however, and the majority of the orders being taken were of the alcoholic variety.

Ranko hopped down from her little corner platform and retrieved her notepad and serving tray from atop the karaoke monitor. That done, she headed toward table nineteen, the closest of her tables. “Hey, everybody! We all having a good night? What can I get you? Anybody need anything topped off?”

The six young men at the table all started shouting their orders to her at once, a cacophony of cocktail names and special requests raining down on the flummoxed server.

“**Whoa!** Easy, boys!” Ranko held up her hands in surrender. “I can only handle one of you at a time.”

A black-haired guy in a brown leather jacket snickered wolfishly, and Ranko could only shake her head and roll her eyes in his direction. *Honestly, dude? Why you gotta make it all nasty like that? I’ve only been a cute girl working at a bar for a couple of weeks, but I’ve already seen plenty of shit that makes me ashamed I was ever a guy. I hope I never came off all gross like that with women. Especially Akane.*

After a high-five or two and a smattering of laughter, the half-dozen patrons eventually calmed down enough to give Ranko their orders individually. Having jotted them all on her notepad, she headed for the service bar to relay the drink requests to Izumi. She stopped behind the main bar to drop a few empty glasses off in the dishwasher.

“Hey, Ranko, honey?” Hana waved to the redhead from behind the blue saloon door. She wasn’t used to standing idle on a busy night, but since Ranko had acclimated to her role, her girls had become so efficient that she barely had

anything to do some nights, especially when the kitchen was slow. “Are you doing okay? You haven’t had a break in a few hours.”

The redhead grinned, waving dismissively in the direction of her adoptive mother as she scooped her tray back into her hand. “I’m alright, Mama! It’ll take more than a few catcalls to wear *me* out.”

Hana laughed with a shake of her head. “I was more worried about your dance routines up there, goofball, but alright. If you’re sure. Let me know if you change your mind, okay? Things are quiet enough back here that I could cover for you for a minute, if you need to sit down.”

Ranko grinned, chuckling under her breath. *If she only knew how much physical exertion I’m used to enduring. I could do this shit all day.*

A sliver of moonlight pierced the darkened front half of the bar as the glass double door opened, admitting three tall men into the establishment from the street. All wore conservative business suits, and they definitely didn’t look like they belonged in a dive bar in Japan at midnight on a work day. From their appearance, Ranko wondered if they were Americans.

Ranko smoothed her lavender sundress around her hips, adjusting her ponytail as she walked up to the hostess stand. She willed herself to suppress a shiver as she stepped into the colder air that had followed the men into the bar, greeting the newcomers with a welcoming wave. “Hi, guys! Looking for a table, or would you rather sit at the bar?”

The tallest of the three replied, but in English. “*We’re okay. Thanks.*”

Ranko looked at him with a bit of confusion, but he extended his palm in a *back off* gesture and led his party to an empty table near the stage. Once seated, the men all began looking over the drink menus, having said nothing further to their server.

Well, alright, Ranko thought with a shrug and a sigh. *Good to see you too, I guess.*

Ranko made a pass by the bar, picking up the six drinks for the table with the rowdy guys at table nineteen and dropping them off. She only had to dodge one hand trying to sneak up the back of her dress as she passed out the cocktails. *One of these days, someone is going to catch me in a bad mood with that nonsense, and they’re gonna have to explain to their wife how their wrist got broken when they get home. You guys are lucky that I need to protect the reputation of the bar for Mama, and I don’t want the girls to know how good I really am at martial arts, because way too many of these dudes have had an asskickin’ on back order for long enough as it is.* Suppressing her instinct to punch the offender, she instead flashed a furious glare at the black-haired man as she stepped out of his reach, hoping he got the hint.

After picking up a few empty glasses and topping off a few beers from a pitcher, she decided to check on the Americans again. She sidled up to table twelve with an exuberant wave, trying to bury her frustration at the boys at table nineteen, and also to offset the brusque greeting the Americans had given her at the hostess stand, by

killing them with kindness. **“Hi, everybody!** My name’s Ranko, and I’ll be taking care of you tonight. Welcome to the Phoenix! What looks good to you?”

The American who had spoken to her at the hostess stand rolled his eyes, responding very slowly, almost condescendingly, in English. *“Three beers and some cheese sticks.”* He tossed the laminated menu to the tabletop, shaking his head in disgust.

Ranko bit her lip, nodding and heading back to Izumi to relay the drink order before slipping through the saloon door to ask Hana to prepare the food. *One of these days, I gotta learn how all these machines and crap work back here, so I can help out more. I wanna learn how every little thing in this place runs. I don’t want there to be a single thing I can’t do to help them, after everything they’ve done for me.*

She buzzed back down the narrow white hallway to the front of the house, scanning the back half of the bar room from behind the twin counters. Seeing that her tables all appeared to be fairly contented for the moment, Ranko rinsed out a few glasses and started the dishwasher while Izumi continued preparing drinks.

As her sister still had a few drinks lined up in the queue ahead of table twelve, Ranko walked to the back corner next to the stage to kill a few minutes. She glanced through the music catalog on the karaoke machine, trying to decide what she might want to sing next and blushing at some of the costumes the girls on the album covers were wearing. *It’s only a matter of time before Izzi manages to stuff me in something ridiculous like that when I sing. She’s already tried more than once. Gods only know what kinda sadistic getup she’s gonna make me wear for her wedding. At least that, I won’t be suffering alone; Yui and the other girls are gonna have to do it too.*

Seeing the drinks for table twelve being lined up on the counter, Ranko rushed back to collect them, “Thanks, Izzi!”

“You got it, sis,” the brunette bartender said with a grin and a nod of her head as she shook a cosmopolitan over her shoulder in her aluminum tin.

Not wanting to further frustrate the irritable-seeming Americans with further delay, Ranko hurried to table twelve. “Here you go, guys!” She placed a frosted glass of cider in front of each of the men, flashing each a bright smile of their own. “Your food should be right up.”

One of the Americans looked over his pilsner glass in disgust, pushing it back in her direction on the tabletop. *“We said beer. What the fuck is this?”* came his angry English reply.

Ranko looked over the glass. *What’s the issue?* She didn’t understand his frustrated glare. “Is it flat? That can happen sometimes when we get a little backed up behind the bar. I’ll get you some new ones right away! Sorry about that!”

She picked up all three glasses, placing them on her tray and returning to the bar counters. As Izumi was still buried in orders, she approached the main bar instead. “Yui, I think these got messed up somehow. I don’t know what’s wrong, but they

didn't want 'em. Maybe the glasses are dirty or something?"

Yui looked over the glasses, shrugging and pouring the first of them out in the sink behind the bar. "Those seemed fine, but we'll redo them anyway. I know that type can be picky sometimes," she said with a sigh. "Sometimes, I think they just want to make you do something twice so they know you paid attention. Sorry they're giving you a hard time."

While Yui popped open some fresh bottles, Hana emerged from the kitchen with the food order for table twelve, which Ranko gratefully accepted. The redhead headed over to the table again, hoping to placate the irritable patrons. "Hi again! So sorry about your drinks; your new ones are almost ready! In the meantime, here's your appetizer!" She placed a tray of nachos at the center of the table, walking off before she heard the shortest of the three exclaim in English, "**What the hell?!**"

Just can't make these guys happy tonight. Damn! What's got them so pissy? She quickly grabbed the three new ciders, this time serving them in the bottles to help ensure that they didn't lose carbonation in the pouring.

When she placed them in front of the three men, one of them slammed the table with his palm. "*Oh, come on!*"

Ranko looked at the three of them, a little panicked. She was trying to determine what to do next when she heard Hana's voice over her shoulder, speaking in English to the man who had smacked the table.

"Is everything okay over here? Anything I can do for you?"

The frustrated man motioned to Ranko as he looked up to Hana, rolling his eyes. "*Yeah. You can get rid of this ditzy **bitch** and find us somebody who can get our orders right!*"

Hana glared at them, raising her voice a little. "*Hey now. We're sorry that your order wasn't right, and I'll be happy to fix it for you, but I won't have you talking about my girls like that!*"

The brash American groaned, gesturing in Ranko's direction again. "*Why not? It's not like the fucking **idiot** has **any idea** what I'm saying.*"

Ranko, for her part, stood at Hana's side like a deer in headlights, feeling quite ashamed that the owner had felt the need to get involved in one of her tables at all. *I'm supposed to do this stuff so she doesn't have to. It's my job*, she fretted nervously.

Hana's furious eyes panned the irritated trio, and she crossed her arms over her breasts with a creak of the well-worn black leather jacket she was almost never seen without. "*What did you order to drink?*"

The youngest-looking of the three Americans chimed up. "*Just three beers. Not like it's especially difficult.*"

Hana nodded sharply. *“Alright. You got it. I’ll get you three beers, no charge. You can drink them on your way out the door.”*

The proprietress’ voice had an angry edge that Ranko hadn’t heard much before, and it was deeply unsettling to the bar’s youngest employee. *Oh, shit. I pissed her off. Fuck.*

The man sitting in the middle of the three motioned angrily toward Ranko, smacking the table hard enough to shake it and draw the attention of a nearby couple having a date at table eleven. *“Can you **believe** this shit? You’re kicking us out because **you** can’t hire competent help? Whatever, lady! I bet the place down the street has cuter girls, anyway.”*

Hana motioned for Ranko to follow her, and stalked angrily up to the bar. “Yui, get me three beers, in to-go cups, for our **douchebag** friends. **Quickly**, please.”

Ranko frowned, grimacing at Hana’s Japanese instructions to her older sister. *Of course they were upset! I got their order wrong! Fuck, I probably screwed up their food, too!*

When the beers were placed on the counter, Ranko hurriedly reached for one, glad for the opportunity to correct her mistake. She looked up, worry in her eyes, as Hana grabbed her wrist and prevented her from taking hold of the first plastic cup.

“Nuh-uh. You, **sit**.” Hana pointed to the closest bar stool. “You aren’t going **anywhere** near that table until those guys are gone, you got me?”

“I... *yes, ma’am.*” Ranko mounted one of the brown vinyl-covered bar stools, looking down at the countertop with a sullen expression on her face. She hadn’t really made too many mistakes since she started working at the bar, and she didn’t like how it felt at all.

Hana collected the full cups in her arms, carrying them to table twelve. She handed each of the men a beer and waited until they stood before physically shepherding them toward the front door.

Ranko didn’t know what was being said, but she couldn’t imagine any of it was pleasant. She wanted to go over to them and apologize; to try to make up for her mistake. *Better not. Mama made it abundantly clear that I wasn’t to talk to them any more. The last thing I wanna do is disobey her and make her even angrier.*

When Hana returned, she motioned for Ranko to stand. “C’mere, Ranko.”

Seeing the dejection in her sister’s eyes, Mei turned to follow and offer support, but Hana waved her off. The matriarch of the Phoenix gave Mei a reassuring smile that Ranko did not see. “Give us a minute, please, Mei? Hold the fort for us out here?”

Mei nodded, and looked over the floor to see if any of Ranko’s tables needed anything.

Meanwhile, Ranko followed her adoptive mother into her office, hanging her head.

She did not like how the situation was playing out, at all. While she hoped it was just Hana's frustration at the rude guests, there was a stiffness in the old barkeep's mannerisms that terrified Ranko. *Am I... going to be let go?*

When the office door latched closed, she could wait no longer to plead her case. "Mam... *Hana*, I'm **so sorry** I messed up their table. I promise I'll be more careful next time." She bowed stiffly to the elder woman, remaining bent at the waist with her eyes to the floor.

Hana, for her part, looked up at her daughter with a puzzled expression that quickly changed into one of disarming understanding as she slipped into the ratty black office chair behind her overflowing desk. "Ranko, honey, come on. Stop that. I'm not mad at you! Not **at all**. Those guys were jerks. We don't need their kind around here."

The redhead exhaled heavily, and her mother could see her fear begin to dissipate in her muscles as Ranko straightened her back and opened her mouth to speak. "Then, *what is...*"

The bar's owner put up a hand to interrupt Ranko's words. "You... **don't speak English**, do you?"

Ranko grimaced and shook her head. "A few words and phrases here and there. That's it. I'm... I'm **really** sorry."

"But..." Hana blinked in confusion. "You've sung plenty of American songs out there. What am I missing?"

The young singer shrugged. "I practice the American ones until I can mostly make the noises I hear in the track like I'm supposed to. I don't have the slightest idea what the heck I'm singing about, most of the time." *I really hope it's nothing gross; I mostly just pick them from the pictures in the computer thing.*

Hana nodded, a concerned expression on her face. "I don't understand. It's been a minute since I went to school, but I know high schools require a couple years of English classes." Her eyes widened and her jaw dropped open slightly as the realization struck home. "You... **never finished school**, did you?"

Ranko did not answer in words, but the shame with which she bowed her head told the proprietress all she needed to know.

"Oh, *honey...*" Hana's hand rose to cover her open mouth.

Ranko sighed, only speaking after a long few seconds of silence. "With all the time I spent traveling with my father, I was probably years behind anyway. I think they only put me in the grade I was in last year because Pop knew somebody on the city council, and I didn't even pass that." She bowed at the waist again. *"I'm so sorry."*

Hana stood from her chair. She closed the distance between them in two quick steps, and as Ranko rose from her bow, Hana wrapped her arms around the slender girl. "Sweetheart, stop that. Don't you **dare** apologize."

What I would give to be able to get my hands around the throat of this poor kid's father, just for a minute, and give him a piece of my mind for all the shit he put her through, Hana thought as she held the slightly trembling teenager.

“Listen to me, Ranko. Everything is okay. I’m not upset with you at all. We’re going to find a way to make this easier for you, I promise. I just need to think on it for a minute and figure out what to do. In the meantime, if you get any other customers that don’t speak Japanese, just come get me or one of your sisters. We’ll handle it.”

Ranko cringed. “I...” She lowered her head. “Yes, *ma’am*. I guess I’ll need to tell the other girls, then.” She bit her lip, her embarrassment painted all over her face.

Hana shook her head, giving her charge another squeeze around the shoulders. “I’ll take care of it.”

The redhead stepped back from the embrace, wiping her eyes before they could well past the point of no return. “*I should... get back out there.*”

Ranko spat the last mouthful of toothpaste into the sink, sticking her out her tongue with a crinkled nose as she rinsed her toothbrush and rested it on the counter. *Blegh. That mint stuff is nasty.* She yawned loudly as she made her way to the open closet. To her dismay, no new options had appeared in it while she was in the shower.

I have gotta find a minute to do some laundry. It's just such a pain in the ass to haul everything to the laundromat around the corner, especially when it's cold. Maybe I can get Aya to give me a lift next time she comes by, Ranko thought hopefully. Of her newfound family, only Ayako and her husband Kage owned a car; Mei and Izumi preferred to rely on public transport, and Yui had taken after the girls' adoptive mother and purchased a motorcycle.

Sighing in resignation, she extracted a red corduroy skirt that didn't *quite* reach her knees and a light gray tee shirt with a large pink heart on the front from her cramped little closet, beginning to get herself dressed. *I'm gonna freeze my tits off in this outfit, and it is going to suck. A lot. As soon as I get some spare money, I have **got** to get myself some warmer clothes.* The Amazon curse of the Full Body Cat's Tongue had made her skin terribly sensitive to heat, but almost more so to extreme cold, and she acutely felt the December chill every time the front door of the Phoenix opened at night.

Pulling her hair into a loose ponytail with a white hair elastic, she looked herself over in the mirror that hung from the closet door. *Not amazing, but it'll do,* she thought to herself, stepping into her black slip-on shoes and opening the apartment door to head downstairs and start her day. She was out the door far earlier than usual on that Monday morning; the slow Sunday night before had permitted Ranko and her sisters to complete most of the closing tasks in the last hour the bar was open. Prior to the night before, the last shift at the Phoenix that Ranko recalled ending before three in the morning had involved a blunt-force head trauma.

She could have stayed upstairs and relaxed, but truly, Ranko wanted to get a head start on the day. *Maybe I can get most of the morning stuff done before the girls even get here, to help out. I bet, with everything going on, they'd appreciate it. I mean, Izzi's neck-deep in wedding planning, and Mei...* Ranko blinked, shaking her head with a sudden realization. *Come to think of it, I don't know **what** the heck's up with Mei. She's only worked one or two nights this week. I hope she's okay. Maybe she's just busy with homework and shit. In any case, I should probably plan on another shift of just me, Mama and Yui. Hopefully it'll be slow again tonight, 'cause man, covering the whole floor by myself and singing once an hour is kinda kicking my ass, especially on the days Izzi tries to make me wear freakin' heels.*

Ranko sighed as she reached the base of the stairs. *Even Mama Hana's been a little distant with me the last few days. I hope it's not, like, 'cause she's still disappointed in me 'cause I didn't finish school or anything like that. It's not that I*

*didn't **wanna** graduate, I just... I couldn't. Not like that. Not at Furinkan. Not as a girl.* She shuddered, recalling the feel of Tatewaki Kuno's hands exploring her chest as they had the first day she had met the philandering upperclassman. *I can't wait 'til Akane's out of that fucking hellhole. I know he graduated, but I'm sure he's still hanging around, especially given his freakazoid dad runs the joint. And it's not like all the rest of the horde is any better, they're just not good enough martial artists to even stand a chance against Akane.*

She shook her head, casting her eyes to the floor as she made a right turn and walked into the empty bar kitchen. *I'm sorry, Akane. Maybe I shouldn't have run. It was selfish, I know. I mean, I'm in a much better place now, but maybe I should have stayed and protected you, even though...* Ranko sighed again, dropping her fist onto the metal prep counter with a loud *thunk*.

*Who am I even kidding? She'd be protecting **me**, rather than the other way around. I'm the fragile little girl now, especially compared to her. **She's** the most badass martial artist in Nerima now, and I'm the one making a living shaking my ass for strangers in short skirts and twin pigtails.*

Ranko scoffed under her breath, allowing herself to laugh at her own realization.

And, while I absolutely hate everything I had to lose to get here, gods help me...

I'm having the time of my fucking life doing it.

I'm happy. I'm safe. I have people that actually... She beamed down at the ever-present silver dragon coiled around her left wrist. Its tiny sapphire eye almost seemed to smile back at her. *"I am wanted, I have worth, and I have people who care about me,"* she whispered, breaking the almost oppressive silence in the normally-bustling commercial kitchen.

Ranko pulled up a metal stool to the prep counter. That done, she walked to the back corner of the room, pulling open the door to the walk-in cooler. *Fuck! Cold-cold-cold... where are you...* She wrapped her arms around her torso, not that it did much to combat the Full Body Cat's Tongue's reaction to standing in a freezer in a thin cotton tee shirt and a skirt that didn't cover even down to her knees. She frantically scanned the aluminum racks of the cooler, bending down at the waist to lift a large plastic bin of oranges from the bottom shelf on her left. Her cheeks flushed as she realized that the way she bent for the bin would have given anyone standing behind her a show under her red corduroy skirt. *Sad thing is, I'm grateful for the warmth on my friggin' face.*

She hurried out of the walk-in, kicking it closed behind her with her heel as she carried the bin of fruit back to her stool. Ranko mounted the stool, yelping audibly as her backside came in contact with the cold metal. **"Shit!"** The redhead rocketed back to her feet, tugging her skirt down as much as it would go on her slender frame in an attempt to prevent her skin from making contact with the seat. Exhaling heavily and bracing herself in case she misjudged the skirt again, she tentatively sat, this time more comfortably.

Sighing, she grabbed an orange from the top of the heaping bin. She reached to her

right, her hand grasping at air over the knife rack. Ranko sighed and rolled her eyes. *You put them all in the dishwasher last night, stupid.* She stood again, making her way toward the main bar down the narrow hallway. After pushing through the blue slatted door into the bar room, she popped open the dishwasher behind the service bar with her foot. Its lower rack slid out to meet her, and she drew a long chef's knife from the plastic silverware caddy in it with a ringing sound not unlike the unsheathing of a sword. She giggled for a moment, imagining herself as some samurai warrior from a Kurasawa movie as she grasped the chef knife's handle with both hands, taking a wide stance behind the service bar. "I, Ranko Tendo, swear on my honor as a martial artist that I will purge the world of all vile, corrupt fruits! Citrus demons, **begone!**" Spinning the knife back into a more defensive posture for safer carrying, she continued laughing as she walked back through the white linoleum-tiled hallway toward the kitchen. She paused halfway, having noticed something strange that had failed to catch her eye on the way out to the bar room.

The door to Hana's office was partially ajar.

Mama never leaves her door open. She's too embarrassed about how messy it gets in there. She cracked a slight smile. I've got some extra time this morning. Maybe I could clean up in there a little for her before she comes in. It'd be a nice surprise, to show her how much I appreciate everything she's been doing for me.

Ranko gently pushed the office door open the rest of the way, its hinges protesting with a quiet *creak*. As she did, she found Hana slumped over on the cracked red leather couch along the far wall. She was quietly snoring. An empty glass tequila bottle lay on the brownish-red area rug, not far from where her left arm loosely hung.

Ranko sighed, putting the knife down as quietly as she could on the cluttered desktop next to a pile of papers, tucking its blade under the stack. "*Mama, this isn't good for you,*" she said quietly, almost to herself rather than her sleeping boss. She picked up the black leather jacket that was still draped over the back of Hana's dilapidated office chair, covering her form up with it as best she could.

As the weight of the coat landed on her body, Hana stirred with a loud groan and reached up for her right temple. "*Huh? Wha... oh. Hey, Ranko.*"

Ranko could tell just from the smell of the old barkeep's breath exactly where the tequila had gone. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to wake you. Are you... *okay?* If you need to rest, you're more than welcome to use the bed upstairs."

Hana waved her off limply, her coordination clearly not fully online yet after having just woken up. "*I'm fine, fine.* You don't fret about me, now, baby. I'm the mom around here. That's my job."

The redhead sighed, shaking her head with an amused smile. "*We take care of each other here, remember? That's what you always say, anyway.*" She spoke more quietly, mindful of the wince on the proprietress' face in response to her initial greeting. Ranko bent down, this time remembering to do so at the knees in deference to the lack of modesty afforded to her in her less-than-modest skirt, and scooped the empty bottle up from the floor. "*Can I... make you some tea or anything?*"

Hana shook her head, a new grimace and her left hand rising to her other temple indicating that she regretted making that particular gesture. “*Coffee. Black. Strong.*”

Ranko flashed the proprietress a spritely grin. “*Coming right up!*” She had been trying to put on as cheerful a demeanor as possible around Hana of late, trying to proactively demonstrate that she was feeling more happy and confident. With any luck, she hoped, it might slow the torrent of well-meaning but prying questions she got about her past from all five of the other denizens of the Phoenix. Ranko actually found it fairly easy to do; she had just gotten in the habit of using her *customer service voice* when speaking to Hana as if she were one of the bar’s patrons and not its owner. She found it hard to do so and simultaneously modulate her vocal volume in order to be considerate of Hana’s apparent hangover, however. The redhead disappeared from the untidy office, returning a few moments later with a steaming white ceramic mug that she handed to the elder woman.

Hana cupped the mug in both of her hands, as Ranko had not offered it to her handle-first. The hypersensitive teen could not bear its heat directly on her skin without the few centimeters of air gap the handle provided. Beyond that, she dared not risk something as innocuous as a few spilled drops of black coffee unveiling her deepest secret: the long-avoided masculine form lying in wait to burst out of her miniskirt in a fit of agony at the first touch of hot liquid. Hana downed half of the mug’s contents quickly, making a little grunt in reaction to the still-scalding brew coursing down her throat.

Ranko pulled the tattered, wheeled office chair around the desk, sitting in it and facing the bar’s matriarch. “Miss Hana, is there anything you want to talk about? You’ve seemed kind of... **off** lately. I’m worried about you.” She had been a little hesitant to use the honorific *Mama* in Hana’s presence for the last few days, owing in large part to her continued sense of guilt over the incident with the American patrons.

The bar’s matriarch shook her head, more gently this time. “It’s nothing you can help with.”

Ranko sighed quietly, looking down at her hands. “Maybe not, but I’d like to try. You’ve done so much for me.”

“I don’t want to talk about it, **okay?!**” Hana’s voice took on an irritated tone that took Ranko by surprise.

Ranko recoiled in shock at the sound of Hana’s raised voice. “I... yes, *ma’am.*”

Hana sighed, downing the rest of her coffee in one gulp and standing. She hesitated for a moment, leaning on the wall behind the couch to regain her equilibrium. As she did, a letter-folded piece of white paper fell off of the couch, seemingly having ended up under Hana’s body when she passed out on it after the previous night’s service.

Ranko bent down in Hana’s chair and picked it up. “*Mama, you dropped your...*” As she held the document up to the barkeep, she caught a glimpse of what was written on it. She hadn’t been trying to pry, but the kanji **FINAL DEMAND FOR PAYMENT** stamped in red across the top were hard to miss.

Hana turned as Ranko spoke, but given her diminished reflexes, she could not react fast enough to keep the letter's contents secret. She sighed defeatedly, slumping back down on the couch. "So, I guess you know now. We're in some trouble here." Hana shook her head dejectedly. "I'm sorry I snapped at you, honey. I'm just... I don't know what I'm gonna do."

Ranko looked at her benefactor, her jaw falling slightly slack. "But... we've been doing so **well** lately, I thought. The bar has been full most nights."

"Since you started singing, yeah. But we were behind long before you got here, honey. It's just been too little, too late. And I... I'm out of ideas. More than thirty years of my life I've poured into this place." She rocked back on the couch, resting her elbows on her thighs and cradling her head in her hands. "*I just haven't been able to figure out how to tell you girls, especially you. You finally had some fucking stability in your life.*"

Ranko looked over the bill in her hand, assuming there were several more bearing such threatening warnings buried in the teetering stack of papers on the desktop behind her. Her mind raced. *Not only will I be out of a job, and a place to stay, but what will it do to Hana and the girls?! Their whole lives are tied up in this place. All of them pay their bills out of here. Their whole **identity** is the Phoenix. Just the way they say the name of the bar, you'd think it was their clan name.*

These people helped me when nobody else would. Maybe I can't be the big, bad martial artist that protects Akane from dozens of horny jocks back at Furinkan anymore, but this? Maybe this, I can do something about. There's more than one way to protect the people you care about. This cannot stand. I'm gonna handle it for them. Somehow. I swear it.

Ranko put on as bright of a *customer service* smile as she could muster, and eyes filled with hope, hoping to replenish Hana's diminished reservoir of it. Meanwhile, at her side, her left hand clenched tight into a determined fist.

This family is not gonna get hurt on my watch, she resolved to herself. **Ever.**

"What we're gonna do is **fix it**, Mama." All of the hesitation Ranko had felt about using the honorific for her benefactor had evaporated in an instant.

Hana scoffed dismissively. "That's a great sentiment, Ranko, but **how?! We owe way too much**, and there just isn't enough time, especially with Christmas coming."

The teen sighed wistfully, thinking back to the prior Christmas. She'd spent it at the Tendo house. She'd never for a moment considered it would be her last one together with Akane. *If she'd only known what she was starting back then, when she forced me to dress up and sing for her dad with her...*

Ranko's eyes lit up, launching herself to her feet with such force that it sent Hana's rickety office chair skittering nearly all the way to the back wall of the cramped office space. "Mama, that's **it!**"

Hana looked up at her ebullient ward with an utterly befuddled look on her face. *First*

*off, she's being entirely too perky for nine in the morning, especially given she just got terrible news. Second, my head is killing me. Third, how could this kid honestly think she's gonna come up with something in a few seconds, when I've been racking my brain for months, with four decades of bar experience under my belt, and come up with bupkus? And, fourth... my head is **really** killing me.*

"You said it yourself," Ranko asserted excitedly. "The bar started filling up when I started singing. So, **that's what I'll do.**"

Hana groaned, both in frustration, and in response to the noticeable rise in Ranko's speaking volume. "Didn't you hear me? We couldn't **possibly** sell enough drinks to catch up the bills before they're due."

The hopeful songstress nodded, grinning with pride at her sudden epiphany. "Which is why we're going to sell **tickets** at the door, too. We're going to have ourselves a **Christmas concert!**"

Hana looked up from her palms. "You... you **can't** be serious."

Ranko nodded forcefully enough to throw her ponytail over her shoulder. "There's room for what, about three hundred people in the bar, if we take the tables in the middle out? If we charge three thousand yen a person, that's..." She searched through the loose papers on the desk for a scratch pad and a pencil, writing out the math problem, and taking a painfully long time to complete it. "**Nine hundred thousand** yen, before drink and food sales. Would that be enough to get us out of trouble?"

The leather-clad barkeep sat up, a spark of hope beginning to take shape behind her mask of melancholy. "Not by itself, but it would be a **damn** good start!"

Ranko beamed. *Did I actually... have a good idea?* "And if we have to, we can always do two events, like, on back-to-back nights or something."

Hana sighed, gently shaking her head. The momentary excitement in her face faded as quickly as it had appeared. "Yeah, but let's be realistic. This is **way** too much to put on you, especially in, what? Eight, ten days? Shit, I don't even know what fuckin' day it is. But, you're already working so hard, and you're just a **kid**. This is why I hid all this from you girls in the first place."

The young singer closed the gap between them, reaching down and offering Hana her right hand. "In the few weeks I've been here, you and Yui and Izzi and Mei have been there for me more than my blood family were in **eighteen years**. You've invested **so much** in me, and now it's time for that investment to pay off." She squeezed Hana's hand reassuringly. "**Please**, Mama? Let me do this, and help my **family**? The way you've all helped me?"

Hana looked up resolutely, a tear forming in the corner of her right eye. "Okay, kiddo. If we're going down, fuck it. Let's have ourselves one hell of a party."

Ranko beamed, punching at the sky with her free hand. "**YES!** I promise, **I won't let you down!**"

Hana stood tentatively, wrapping an arm around Ranko's shoulders both in affection and to steady herself. "You couldn't if you tried, honey. But hey, do me a favor today?"

The redhead nodded, breathing deep of the scent of Hana's leather jacket. The smell always seemed to relax her. She associated it with hugs. With safety. With *love*. "Anything, Mama."

The elder woman smiled, leaning down and softly kissing her young charge on the forehead. "Keep your fucking voice down, would ya, please?"



Hana leaned back in her wooden chair, her eyes searching the faces of the four women seated with her at table sixteen for reactions to Ranko's idea. Her own facial expressions were obscured by the dark-tinted sunglasses she wore to help keep her raging hangover at least partially at bay. The sparkly pink heart-shaped frames looked utterly ridiculous on the middle-aged, rough-and-tumble woman, but they were the only pair her youngest charge had available to loan her.

Yui spoke first, sitting up in her chair. She set her half-empty beer bottle down on the tabletop. "So, let me get this straight: we're in the shit, and our solution is to **throw a friggin' party?!**"

Ranko nodded. "Something like that, yeah. If we get the word out on the college campuses and stuff, I think we can put a pretty big dent in the problem, anyway. C'mon! We've gotta **try**, girls!"

To Ranko's right, a diminutive young woman with cotton-candy blue pigtails shrugged in exasperation. "But Christmas is less than **two weeks away!** How do you think we're going to pull this off?!"

Ranko cocked her head in Mei's direction, flashing her big sister a confident smile despite her own concerns. "It's gonna be hard, and even if we do everything right, it might not be enough. But I think we can pull it off, if we remember what we're fighting for and we do it **together**. This place is too important to all of us to not do everything in our power that has even a **chance** to help. We have an obligation to **try**."

"Well, I bet we could do a couple of special holiday-themed cocktails to get people ordering more drinks. I've been wanting to experiment with some stuff for a while," Yui said thoughtfully. "Maybe something with peppermint?"

Ranko clapped her hands once. *If Yui's on board, I just know the others will follow suit.* "Yes! Yui, that's a **great idea!** We'll need to make sure we have plenty of Christmas songs loaded up for me, too."

Hana nudged Ranko's arm, reclaiming her young ward's attention. "One problem

we're glossing over, missy. Most Christmas songs are in *English*, remember?"

The redhead shrugged. "I'll just make the sounds; I don't even have to know what they mean. I already do that up there, sometimes."

The proprietress shook her head. "That's not going to work. You won't know what to choreograph, or what words to emphasize. Besides, if you're going to make me accept your help, I'm going to make you accept mine. We're going to help you learn it. I'm not saying you're gonna get you fluent in a week or anything, but let's see what we can do."

Ranko rolled her eyes with a smirk. "Christmas hardly seems like the right time to go back to school, but if you think it'll help, I'll try." She turned back to the blue-haired girl on her right. "Any ideas on how we can *festive the shit* outta this place on the cheap, Mei?"

Mei rubbed her chin for a moment thoughtfully before answering. "Didn't Ayako say Kage's mom loved Christmas, mama? I could have sworn she was talking about that with us at the wedding. And with her in-laws in Florida for the winter, I bet all their decorations are just sitting in an attic somewhere. Maybe we could borrow them?"

The only brunette at the table clapped her younger sister on the shoulder through her pastel green cardigan. "Great thinking, Mei! You wanna give Aya a call later and ask?" Izumi beamed with excitement. If there was one thing that never failed to energize the young designer, it was the opportunity to work on a creative endeavor - **especially** one that had a chance to involve stuffing one or more of her sisters into some over-the-top outfit or another.

Mei nodded. "Will do. I could try to do some Christmas-themed desserts or something, too, I guess."

Izumi gave her sister a bright grin and a thumbs-up. "I think that'd be **awesome!** I bet Aya'd love to help with that, too! She always **did** love working back in the kitchen!" The family's designated fashionista then turned her gaze back to the red-haired starlet seated opposite her. "And, speaking of getting things **decorated all pretty...**"

"Hmm?" Ranko looked up, swallowing hard at the sight of the devious expression on her sister's face. *I don't know where this is going, but something tells me I ain't gonna like it.*

Izumi grinned at her youngest sister. "This isn't just folks coming to a bar for a drink and listening to some karaoke while they're waiting on their tater tots. If we pack this place at three thousand yen a pop, they'll be paying specifically to see **you**, superstar. We've got to make sure you **look the part**. I'm talking, dress, hair, nails, makeup, the whole shebang."

Yui chuckled, tilting her beer bottle toward Izumi. "You've been trying to primp and polish that poor kid up since the second you met her, Izzi. She's not a fuckin' Barbie doll." Turning her gaze to Ranko, she softened her smile. "That said, this time, I

think she's probably got a point, Ran-chan."

Ranko groaned, lowering her head. *I did say I'd do anything I could to help. I guess that includes...* She sighed in resignation, cradling her forehead in her palm and resting her elbow on the tabletop. "*Alright, alright, Iz. You win. **This time.** But don't let it go to your head. This is *special circumstances.*"*

Izumi clapped her hands excitedly. "Yes! A true **fashion emergency!** I've been training my whole life for this! It's what I **live for!**"

"Think you could spare some of that energy to spread the word around your school?" Ranko grinned. "If you hit Shibuya Tech, and Mei can cover Minato University, that's thousands of potential people, and we can only fit three hundred in here anyway. Three-fifty, tops, if everybody gets *real* friendly."

The brunette turned the little pink notebook she'd been writing in to show Ranko that it was already filling up with ideas of places where the show could be promoted. "I **got** this, hon."

Hana looked around at her girls, wearing a proud smile despite her migraine. "It seems like everyone has a job except me."

Yui grinned, throwing her sweater-clad arm over Hana's shoulder. "Oh, I'm sure we'll find a use for you yet, *old lady.*"

The girls' mother gave Yui a *you've gotta be kidding me* glare over the rims of her borrowed sunglasses. Her brief fit of mock indignation gave way to a broad smile, and she reached up to her face, pulling off the dark glasses so that everyone could see the sincerity in her eyes as she spoke. "I am just **so proud** of you all."

Yui stood, leaning over Hana's chair to hug her tighter around the shoulders. "Well, I guess it's a good thing all of us had **someone** in our lives who taught us how to pick ourselves up when we get knocked down and **fight like hell** for what's important to us."

Hana smiled up at the tall blonde. Within moments, the other three girls stood and huddled around Hana's chair as well, joining her and Yui in a short group hug.

The bar's mistress of mixology let go first, clapping her hands loudly. Yui cringed a bit, when she noticed Hana recoiling from the sound. "Well, alright, girls! What are you all standing around for?! We've got **work to do!**"

Spurred on by Yui's call to action, the wayward sisters scattered throughout the bar to attend to their designated tasks.

"Don't forget, girls, we still have to open **tonight**, too. Let's make sure everything's ready."

From four different places in the suddenly-bustling bar room came a merry chorus of assent: "**Yes, Mama!**"

Ranko started heading for the kitchen, realizing she'd never gotten around to slicing the oranges she'd taken out of the walk-in nearly two hours prior. Before she could reach the saloon door, Izumi playfully grabbed her ponytail and gave it a gentle tug. "Excuse me, little miss. Where do you think **you're** going?"

The redhead shrugged, pulling her hair back out of Izumi's hand gently. "I was gonna help prep the kitchen, like I always do."

Izumi grinned absolutely mischievously. "Okay! Good idea! I'll head over to the mall by myself, then, and you can just... wear **whatever** I decide to pick out for you."

Ranko swallowed with a **gulp** that was audible even over the clink of glass bottles being stocked behind the service bar. "*Uhhhhh, Mama?* Izzi and I are... going out for a while."

The excited brunette threw her arm around the small of her shorter sister's back, pulling her out from between the main and service bar counters and toward the bar's glass double doors at the front of the building. "I thought you might say something like that, Ran-chan! C'mon, let's go!"

Ranko inhaled sharply, slowing to walk behind Izumi instead of next to her. From her slightly ragged breathing, it sounded as if she was in some sort of pain.

The third time she heard it over the whistling of the light wind blowing in her face, Izumi looked behind with a concerned expression. “Ran-chan, are you okay? You’re awfully quiet.” She placed her hand on Ranko’s shoulder, and before the younger girl could answer, she knew the problem. “Gods, you’re shivering something *terrible!* Are you *that cold?!*”

Ranko nodded emphatically, unsure she could speak without her teeth chattering. The temperature was fairly mild for a December in Tokyo, but not for someone in a tee shirt, a knee-length skirt, and a full body’s worth of skin as sensitive as a cat’s tongue.

“Why didn’t you put on something warmer, silly?” Ranko’s sister shook her head, brushing a wisp of her hair that had been displaced by the wind out of her eyes and tucking it behind her ear just beneath her gray knit hat.

Ranko looked down, a glint of shame in her eyes.

Again, Izumi answered her own question. “You don’t **have** anything warmer, do you?” For as obsessed with her new sister’s wardrobe as she had been, she couldn’t believe that she’d only actually added a few outfits to the eight or so that had been in the upstairs closet the day she arrived. The rest of the outfits Ranko had worn on stage had been things Izumi had loaned her from her own closet. *We’ve gotta do something about this. At this rate, she’s going to wind up coming down sick with something,* Izumi thought with a deep frown. *Well, I know what you’re getting for Christmas, Ran-chan.*

Izumi grabbed the faux leopard-fur trimmed sleeve of her heavy black cropped jacket, beginning to pull it off. “Here, put this on.”

Ranko shook her head. “*I’m f-f-fine.*”

Izumi rolled her eyes. “Like hell you are. Come on now. I’ve still got a sweater and jeans; I’m plenty warm without it. Let’s go, little sister. I’m not asking here.”

Ranko sighed regretfully. *I can’t make a girl suffer in the cold while...* She shook her head with a self-admonishing roll of her eyes, her cheeks warming slightly despite the chill. *You’re a girl now, too, dummy. You don’t have to be the white knight and take the hit all the time anymore.* “O-k-kay. Th-th-th-thanks.”

Izumi wrapped the puffy jacket around the redhead’s shoulders. As Ranko’s hands found their way into the sleeves, Izumi rubbed her back vigorously through the thick material to warm it up for her faster. “Since we’re out shopping anyway, we are getting you at least a coat or **something** you can wear in the cold. It’s non-

negotiable.”

“I th-think I’d like that, please,” Ranko replied with a grateful smile.



“Alright. First things first, we need to find something warmer for you to wear. We need a pop **star**, not a **pop-sicle**.” Izumi consulted the backlit directory kiosk of her favorite Shibuya shopping mall as she spoke.

Ranko nodded vigorously, rubbing her bare legs with her hands to try and warm them. She followed as Izumi led her into a large department store, pointing her in the direction of a display of denim.

“What size do you wear in jeans?” Izumi asked, already digging through a pile of slim-cut offerings.

Ranko turned to answer. She opened her mouth to speak, realizing at the last moment that the answer she was about to give had been in men’s sizes. “I... actually don’t know. Sorry.”

Izumi shook her head with a smile. “Come to think of it, around the holidays, nobody does, honey. Get used to it.” She pulled the same style of navy blue jeans in three different sizes from the white cubby shelf in which they were stacked, handing the pile of folded pants to her protégé. “Fitting room’s right over there. Go on. *Shoo*.”

After waiting for a moment for one of the three booths to be vacated, Ranko dropped the stack of jeans on its small padded bench, latching the door behind her. She unbuttoned the waistband of her red corduroy skirt, letting it fall to the floor and reaching for the topmost pair of pants. The first pair Ranko tried was far too big for her, but the second slid on comfortably. Zipping them up, she started to test her movement in them. They definitely fit tighter than men’s pants, especially in the front. Of course, most of the pants she’d ever worn, especially in her masculine form, had been gi pants that were far more forgiving, designed for flexibility rather than fashion.

While she was slowly getting used to spending time in skirts, owing to Izumi’s constant quest to doll her up for the ravenous crowds that watched her on stage, there was a certain comforting feeling about wearing pants again. Looking at herself in the mirror, she couldn’t help but notice what the tight jeans did for her shape. *Speaking objectively as someone who used to be a dude and spent a lot of time looking at girls, this ain’t half bad. And hey! Bonus! They have pockets! Glorious pock... wait.* She pulled her fingertips out of the slit in the fabric, where they had barely delved past her painted fingernails before hitting bottom. *Okay, what asshole got the bright idea to put fake pockets on girls’ clothes?! Seriously, that’s just a cruel freakin’ tease.*

She emerged from the fitting room, carrying the red skirt she had been wearing, and

setting the two rejected pairs on the little chrome rack designated for products that needed to be reshelved. “How’s this look?”

Izumi gave her a thumbs-up. “They fit you good, it looks like! Keep ‘em on until we’re ready to leave so you stay warm, and you can change out of them when it’s time to check out. If you like them, grab another pair or two, and let’s keep going. Lots to do, and not a lot of time.”

Mindful of her still-limited budget, Ranko returned to the shelf where Izumi had found the jeans she was wearing and picked up one more pair, this one in black. Turning, she hurried after her sister-turned-stylist.

Izumi led her up an escalator to the second floor, taking a mere moment to locate a display of winter coats. “Here, pick yourself something out from here. Ideally something in a neutral color, like we did with your purse.”

Ranko nodded, setting about looking for something in brown, black, white, or gray. *Hey*, she thought with a bright smile, *I’m learning!* She wasn’t sure if she was proud or embarrassed, but she leaned toward the former. Her gaze quickly fell on a white peacoat. It was constructed of a heavy fabric, so it would be warm without the addition of fur or other textures that would be distracting on her skin. She picked it up and held it against her body on the hanger. It came down almost to her knees, which she hoped would help keep her legs warm even when she was wearing a skirt. Izumi’s cropped jacket had barely reached halfway down her rib cage, by comparison, even on her shorter frame.

“Nice choice! It’s cute, too! Here, let me help you try it on.” She helped Ranko out of the jacket she had loaned her sister, tossing it over the aluminum rack for the moment, and held the white coat open for Ranko to slip into.

Ranko found that the peacoat was surprisingly comfortable and easy to move in, and it felt warmer even than Izumi’s fur-lined jacket she had on previously. “Oh, yeah, I *like* this one! Does it look okay?”

Izumi grinned, pulling her own jacket back on as she spoke. “One of these days you’re gonna get the full shopping experience, where you try on eight or nine things before you find something you like.”

The redhead shrugged with a winning smile. “Hey, what can I say? I’m easy to please. Low-maintenance girl, right here.” She gestured to herself with her thumbs for emphasis.

Izumi scoffed. “Just wait until you’re trying on *wedding dresses*. You have to do like two hundred of them, and they take twenty minutes each for two people to get you in and out of.”

The white coat contrasted sharply with the neon red shade of Ranko’s face.

“Oh, stop with that look.” Izumi tittered, rumpling her sister’s hair gently. “I know it never feels like it until it does, but it’ll happen for you one day, too.”

For a split second, Ranko allowed herself to form the mental picture of herself in a white wedding gown, almost hearing Akane's voice in the recesses of her mind, before she shook herself free of it. *Snap out of it, idiot. There's about fourteen levels of wrong with that picture. I've got a better chance to walk to the moon.* "Yeah, if you say so," she replied mously, her cheeks warm enough to fry bacon on.

"Speaking of which..." Izumi took her hand, pulling her a few dozen meters into another section of the store. There, numerous formal gowns were displayed on mannequins positioned next to racks mounted high on the walls to keep the long dresses from dragging the floor. She pointed at a sky-blue shimmery satin dress. It had spaghetti straps, a fairly modest cut at the chest, and a floor-length skirt with a knee-high walking slit snaking up the left side. A blue-gray satin ribbon encircled it at the waist, tying in a loose bow at the left hip. "What do you think of **that?**"

Ranko's face flushed deeper still. "*Yeaaaaaaah*, I don't think that's going to work. I can't wait tables in that!" *Or, you know, wear it at all*, she thought to herself. *I'm a girl now, but I've still got limits.*

Izumi laughed. "Not for **work**, blockhead! For the **wedding!** I'm thinking about going with that for the bridesmaids. I really like it, but we'll need to find some sort of a shrug for Yui if I do."

Crap. I almost forgot I agreed to do that. I mean... Ranko was almost lightheaded from all the blood flow to her face as she glanced over the dress again, now giving herself permission to actually consider it. *It's really pretty, but, like, for somebody else. There's no way I could pull off something like that. I wouldn't even know how to behave dressed like that, when everything's all formal and proper and shit. I'll say the wrong thing, or eat something with my fingers that I wasn't supposed to, and some duchess somewhere will have a heart attack just thinking about it.*

"Uhhh, how do we feel about a nice, **casual** wedding? Jeans, tee shirts, maybe some barbecue?" She chuckled nervously, fidgeting with her fingers.

"Not a chance, little sister. Did you forget who you're talking to? **Hello**, fashion queen, right here!" Izumi pointed to herself with both of her index fingers. "Sorry, but you're going to have to suck it up and be elegant for a day. Who knows, you might even enjoy the whole princess dress-up thing if you give it a chance." Judging by what Ranko had told her of her childhood, Izumi doubted she had experienced that type of play very much growing up.

"*I wouldn't hold your breath*," came Ranko's grumbled reply.

Izumi chuckled a little darkly. "If the corsets I've tried on so far are any indication, I just might **have to**."

Ranko could not stifle the tension-breaking giggle that followed, and Izumi joined her in it.

"Come on, you. Let's find you something fabulous for your big show. Your first real **concert**." The young fashionista motioned her recalcitrant sister toward another array of racks.

Ranko groaned, half-kiddingly, and followed as she was directed to a seasonal section. The racks were filled with festive cocktail dresses in red, green, white and black, as well as sweaters with holiday patterns on them. Her eyes fell on a green knit sweater, an enormous drunken reindeer fashioned on its front out of red sequins. Images of glittery presents and an array of elves, candy canes, bells, and other holiday imagery covered the entire rest of the garment. *Who the hell would wear something like that? They're hideous! I mean, maybe they're warm, and that's why? I guess somebody's buyin' 'em, though, 'cause they've got a shitload of 'em.*

"Okay, kiddo. Our mission is to find something flirty, cute, and Christmas-ey. Let's lock in."

Ranko shuddered. "Flirty? **Really?!** Do you honestly not think I get *enough* wandering hands on an average shift?"

Izumi rolled her eyes. "I know, I know. You're not likely to be out in the crowd too much this time, though. You're pretty much gonna be nailed to the stage, girl. Besides, you're putting on a **show**. You're an *entertainer* now, little sister. We have to give them what they **want**."

The redhead sputtered a raspberry with her lips. "Says **who?**"

Izumi snickered. "Don't forget, this whole thing was **your** idea, Ran-chan."

Ugh. She's right. Why does she have to be right? Resigning herself to her fate, Ranko began searching the racks. Alright, Ranko, think. What would have excited me to see Akane wearing, back when I was a guy? Or, for that matter... Her face warmed yet again, but she willed the intrusive thought out of her mind as quickly as it had entered. *Stop that, Ranko. It's never gonna happen.* She emitted a quiet, resigned sigh. *I damn sure wouldn't have been worried about whether it was itchy, or too short, or warm enough, or if it had pockets, though. Man, shit changes when you don't have testosterone pumping through your brain by the liter, I guess.*

She was pulled out of her thoughts when Izumi called out, "How about this?"

Ranko looked up as Izumi raised a hanger above her head, on which hung a mostly sheer red satin garment. *Wait a second. That's a **dress?!** That looks more like something a girl would wear **under** a dress, if they wanted to be all sexy and shit.* "No way I'm wearing that in public." *Or in private. Or anywhere.*

As she returned the hanger to the rack, Izumi gasped, her eyes falling on something across the aisle. "Oh, that's it. *I got it!*"

Ranko sighed resolutely, mentally preparing herself for whatever fresh hell her self-nominated fashion consultant had deigned to torment her with, and plodded along after her.

The elder girl reached the rack first, and pulled another hanger from the aluminum clothes rack. From it hung a forest green dress made of crushed velvet. The neckline was fairly modest, square cut and rimmed in white faux fur. It had long sleeves, with more white fluff lining the cuffs like Izumi's coat had. Izumi held it up to

Ranko's body. Its lower hem, lined with more of the soft fake fur, came to just above the songstress' knees. A white vinyl belt was wrapped around the waist, and part of the vinyl was molded into a small white bow that concealed the clasping mechanism to secure the belt.

"That's... actually not *that* bad. All things considered, anyway." She glanced up at the wall-mounted mirror, chuckling a bit at her reflection. *I'm gonna look like Santa's naughtiest elf in this thing. I'm guessing that's the point.*

Izumi nodded excitedly. "Are you kidding? It's *amazing!* Go try it on?!"

But... you got me a coat and a pair of jeans, and I finally got warm! With a nod and a groan, Ranko snatched the hanger from her hand and locked herself in a nearby fitting room stall.

When she emerged in the festive holiday dress, Izumi clapped her hands excitedly. "Yes! That's *perfect!* It just needs a few finishing touches. I'm on it! Go get changed back into the outfit you wore in, so we can get checked out, and I'll be right back!"

By the time Ranko re-emerged in her tee shirt and red skirt, still wearing the white peacoat, Izumi was leaning against the fitting room wall waiting for her. In her hand was a small, green plastic shopping basket full of various accessories. There were hair clips, some sort of stockings, and a green velvet Santa hat that matched the material of the color of the dress nearly perfectly, and more things besides. "All set? Here, I also grabbed these, so you'd have some selection to choose from." Izumi pulled a stack of Christmas-themed cassette tapes out of the basket, showing the spines of the plastic cases to her companion. "You think these will work?"

Ranko shrugged. "Hell if I know. I guess so?" She'd never picked the music when she sang Christmas songs at the Tendo home; she had always just gone through whatever motions Akane had asked her to. At the bar, it had mostly been Mei picking the songs. *And in any case, it's not like I know what they say, anyway.*

The brunette nodded. "Alright. We should pay for this stuff and think about getting back to the bar. It's getting late, and they're gonna need us in time for opening." She led her sister to a nearby checkout station, where a bored-looking clerk in his early twenties leaned on the counter. He was almost impossibly thin, his red uniform polo almost a full size too big for him.

"Hello! Thank you for shopping at W... w..." His voice stopped mid-word as his gaze fell on the redhead standing at Izumi's side. He reached for Izumi's shopping basket, his eyes not leaving the redhead, and almost knocked it off the counter when he misjudged the distance he had to reach to extract the first of the accessories Izumi had chosen from it. "*S-s-sorry.*"

Izumi flashed her sister a mischievous grin as the clerk managed to begin scanning their selections, dragging them across a barcode reader mounted under a panel of glass in the countertop.

Ranko pulled her new peacoat off, setting it on the counter to be scanned. She could have sworn the poor guy at the counter's eyes were going to pop out of his

head as he picked up the coat with a tremble in his wrist. *What's this guy's deal? He's acting like he saw a ghost or something.*

Reaching into her purse, Izumi laid a stack of bills in the plastic payment tray on the counter, bowing in polite thanks as she collected the three bags containing their spoils, handing the two containing the jeans and the coat to her sister. "You should pop back into the fitting room and put these back on, so you're warmer on the way home."

Ranko nodded, and the pair started walking back toward the changing area. She shot Izumi a side-eyed glance, as her sister had started giggling the moment they were out of earshot of the register. "What's so funny?!"

"Oh, *come on*, girl! Don't even **try** to tell me you didn't see that." Izumi smirked, glancing back at the checkout counter.

Now what the heck did I get wrong? The redhead flushed in embarrassment. "Izumi, what the hell are you talking about?"

Wow, Izumi thought, blinking in surprise. *She really is that oblivious, huh?* She leaned in closer to her sister, speaking in a hushed tone. "That guy was **totally** checking you out, sis."

Ranko gulped so hard that thought she might swallow her own tongue. "**N-no way!**"

"Don't worry, little sister," Izumi said as they reached the fitting room stalls. "I'll stand guard while you change, so nobody comes peeping." She flashed her sister an absolutely devilish sneer. "Unless you'd prefer I *didn't*, that is..."

The redhead pushed open the middle of the three stall doors, turning back to Izumi with a flustered smile as she set her bags on the bench. "So, hey, Miss Konishi? *Bite me.*"



Some forty-five minutes after departing the shopping mall, the pair entered the bar they called home through the glass double doors. Ranko was indeed grateful to have her new jeans and coat, as the temperature had dropped significantly in the two hours they had spent in the mall, and the wind had picked up as well. There hadn't been much conversation on the train ride back; Ranko had spent most of the train ride using Izumi's portable cassette player to listen to the new tapes through a bulky set of headphones that were fortuitously doubling as earmuffs, trying to get a head start on choosing and memorizing songs.

The main bar room was a flurry of activity. Hana stood on a tall stepladder, weaving strands of shiny silver garland through the trusses holding up the stage lighting. The garland was being fed from the topmost of six stacked plastic bins, with Ayako standing next to the pile ensuring the garland didn't tangle as it emerged from its

plastic prison. Yui was furiously shaking her cocktail tin over her shoulder, behind an array of dozens of bottles of every shape and size scattered across the main bar counter. Behind the disorderly row of liquor bottles was an assortment of festively-decorated glasses containing liquids of varying colors and thicknesses, each with black plastic straws protruding from them. Unless she was in the kitchen, Mei did not seem to be present. An upbeat instrumental Christmas song thumped through the sound system.

Izumi waved to three of her friends, all women, who were huddled around table eight in the corner. One of them held aloft a hand-drawn poster advertising the last-minute Christmas concert to be held on Saturday night. "How's this look, Izzi?"

Izumi gave the girls a double-thumbs up. "That's looking **great**, girls! Good job! Can we do ten more just like it?"

Yui removed the mixing glass from her shaker tin, dipping a straw directly into the shaker rather than pouring its contents into a clean glass. She covered the end of the straw to create negative pressure, scooping a small sampling of the cocktail into her mouth. She smacked her lips loudly as she turned around, dumping the contents of her shaker into the sink. "Nope, way too tart. Let's try that one again."

Ranko looked around, taking in all of the commotion. "Wow! This came together *fast!*"

Izumi grinned, poking her sister playfully on the nose. "It's all for **you**, sis."

The younger girl blushed, tucking a stray strand of her red hair that had escaped her ponytail behind her ear.

Yui grinned up at the pair, finally having looked up from her mixology experimentation long enough to notice they had returned. "Hey, hey! What do you think, Izzi? Is our **star** ready to shine?"

Ranko's face took on more color yet, and she fidgeted with her hair some more, using it as an excuse to hide her face behind her hand.

Izumi, picking up on the young singer's discomfort, smiled reassuringly at Ranko and laid her arm over the shorter girl's shoulders. "She was *born* ready."

Yui gave a warm smile in response. "Damn straight. Oh, hey! Izzi, c'mere! You gotta try this!" She handed over a Collins glass filled with a thick white liquid. The outside of the glass was striped in a thin red ribbon, and a sprig of fresh peppermint floated at the top.

Izumi covered the top of the straw with her finger, lifting the straw to her mouth and releasing the pressure to free the liquid trapped within. A quiet *mmm* escaped her throat as she swallowed. "It tastes just like a candy cane! That's *so freaking good*, Yui!"

Noticing Ranko looking over with a curious expression in her eyes, Izumi reloaded the straw, holding it out to her. "Come on, kiddo. I won't tell if you don't."

Ranko grinned and stepped forward, and Izumi popped the straw past her lips and released her thumb. “Oh, wow. That really *is* good!”

Yui beamed, offering her sister a cocky smirk. “Did you honestly doubt me? I’m working on a gingerbread one and a spiked eggnog, but they’re not quite right yet. I’ll get ‘em though; I’ve still got some time.”

The young singer’s eyes panned the room as she tried to make eye contact with everyone individually. *They’re all working so hard to put my idea together, in order to help Hana out. To help my **family**. Fuck, it feels so good to be a part of this.*

Looking around, Izumi leaned over the counter. “Hey, Yui? Where’s Mei hiding?”

The blonde shrugged, a perplexed expression on her face. “Your guess is as good as mine.”

“Said Santa to a pork chop, what have you a...”

Hana laughed, shaking her head and putting up her left hand. Her right, meanwhile, cradled her forehead in it. “*Baby, baby...*”

Ranko stopped singing mid-word, slumping her shoulders and growling low and loud in her frustration. “***Damn it!*** I messed it up ***again***, didn’t I?!”

Her adoptive mother nodded. “It says *boy child*,” she repeated in English, slower and more clearly enunciated than the lyrics had done. “Like, a little boy, like Hoshi.”

The redhead sighed, wiping the sweat from her brow with a blue bar towel. Despite the late-morning December chill still lingering in the empty watering hole a few blocks from the Minato harbor, she’d been dancing under the bar’s lone spotlight non-stop for hours. She had on a long-sleeved black turtleneck, a hand-me-down gift from Izumi after nearly freezing to death during their shopping trip two days ago. It clung tightly to her form. Below that, she wore her new black jeans and a pair of black heeled boots.

“I’m ***never*** gonna get this stuff in time! Maybe we should stick to Japanese songs.” As she vented, she walked over to the karaoke station, pressing *stop* and ceasing the upbeat guitar blaring through the twelve ceiling-mounted box speakers that made up the bar’s sound system. No lyrics appeared on the monitor, as they’d had to resort to regular cassettes, and so Ranko had nothing but her ear to try and mimic the unfamiliar English words.

“I don’t know if there ***are*** enough Japanese Christmas songs, honey. Not popular ones, at least. But you can do it. You’ve already gotten four of them down, and we’ve still got a couple of days yet. C’mon, little star, sit down a minute. You haven’t left that corner all day.” Hana turned to look over her shoulder, calling back to the service bar. “Izzi, honey, bring your sister something to drink when you have a second, would you, please?” She pulled out a chair at the table closest to the stage for Ranko, physically guiding her to it by the shoulders.

Ranko sighed, nodding her thanks as Izumi handed her a pilsner glass full of soda. “It wouldn’t be so bad if I could just keep everybody focused on the dancing, but there’s no room to really ***do*** anything up there except wiggle in place.” She gestured to the tiny triangular stage crammed into the corner of the bar against the back wall of the ladies’ room. “I might almost be better off standing on one of the tables.”

Hana flashed a knowing glance and a bit of a smirk in Izumi's direction as the brunette buzzed back to the service bar to resume stocking the back bar with liquor. "I mean, you wiggle with the best of 'em, baby." She chuckled deviously. "Maybe not so much in *that* top, though."

The redhead flushed deeply. "Mama!" She hid her face in her hand. "I think it shrank a little bit in the dryer. I feel awful; Izumi gave it to me and I messed it up the first day."

"It happens, honey. You gotta read the labels on stuff. I swear, half the stuff they make these days, you look at it funny and it just... *poof!*" Hana flared her fingers outwardly on both hands, miming an explosion. "Shit just *evaporates!* That's why it's tee shirts and jeans all day for me. No muss, no fuss."

Ranko scoffed, sipping from her soda glass. "Yeah, well, convince Izzi that I can dress like a biker on stage every night, and I'm in, too."

"Fat chance!" came a shout from the direction of the service bar.

The young singer giggled, shrugging at her mother. "What the hell, it was worth a tr..."

With a loud *bang*, the double doors at the front of the bar opened from the street, and Mei burst through them, tossing her purse on the counter. "So sorry I'm late, everybody. Time got away from me."

Yui grunted something in acknowledgement, but didn't seem very impressed with her sister's explanation. "*For the fourth time this week,*" she grumbled as she shelved a bottle of bourbon.

Mei looked around, waving to Ranko as she took in the finished state of the bar's holiday decor. "It's looking really good in here!"

Yui scoffed, spinning a bottle of peppermint schnapps into her palm. "Nice of you to notice."

The blue-pigtailed girl rolled her eyes with a frustrated sigh. "Yeah, well... I guess I'm going to get the kitchen set up."

Ranko winced a bit at the tension building between her sisters.. "Here, Mei, let me come help?" Mei didn't react, instead just disappearing into the kitchen, and Ranko followed behind shortly thereafter, joining her at the prep counter in the small commercial kitchen. As Mei had already taken to preparing the batter for the chicken wings, Ranko began pouring flour and water into the steel bowl at the base of their countertop mixer, starting to get a batch of pizza dough prepared. "Hey, Mei... are you... *okay?*"

Mei growled under her breath in response. “Why is everybody asking me that all the time lately? I’ve just been **busy**, alright?”

The younger girl nodded quietly, approaching as non-threateningly as possible with her hands up at the level of her breasts. “Hey, it’s cool. I’m not judgin’ ya, sis. Just, ya know, if there’s anything you want to talk about, you know I’m here, is all. Gods know you’ve been here for me; it’s the least I can do.”

Mei looked up from her plastic bin of flour and seasoning, managing a smile. “Yeah, I know. Thanks, hon. I just... I didn’t wanna talk about it with Yui and everybody, especially while they’ve been so focused on getting ready for this show.” She blushed a little bit, and her smile widened. “I’ve been *seeing somebody*.”

Ranko gave a surprised little gasp, smiling as she rounded the prep counter across from her sister. “Well, that’s **great!** I’m so happy for you! Tell me about him?” She flushed, realizing she’d never learned much about her sister’s preferences in matters of romance. “Or **her**, I guess, if that’s...”

The elder sighed dreamily, leaning forward on the metal counter between them over the large plastic tub. “My gods, Ranko, he’s so handsome, and he’s a good dresser, and the way he talks is so, I don’t know, almost **regal**.”

Ranko nodded as she added some paprika to the bin between them, rotating her wrist sideways in a *please continue* gesture with a little giggle.

“Gods, let’s see... he’s super popular, too. He’s one of the top athletes at Shinagawa Academy. Like, he’s set all kinds of famous records and stuff. Though, not as many, since he and his partner split up and he started competing solo.”

The redhead looked up, confusion in her eyes. “**Partner?** What sport does he play? Tennis or something?”

“Believe it or not? **Figure skating!** You wouldn’t think that would be so popular, especially compared to the more rough-and-tumble sports. But, ever since he started, he’s only ever lost one match. I guess it doesn’t matter what you do, they love you if you win!” Mei emitted a giddy little laugh as she reached for the oregano.

Ranko’s face fell. *Oh, no*, she thought to herself. “Wh...what’s his name?” *Please be wrong*, she thought. **Please be wrong**.

Mei smiled brightly, a far-off look in her starry eyes. She pronounced the name with almost reverence, as if she were speaking of a movie star or a king. “**Mikado Sanzenin**.”

Ranko felt as if she’d been punched in the stomach, and the room started to spin a little bit. *Not him. Not Sanzenin. Not here. Anything but that. Ryoga, Xian Pu, hell, Pop can find me here. I’ll deal with it. But Sanzenin? After everything he took from me?* Her mind flashed back to that day. Being lifted off her feet, restrained helplessly, and kissed. **Taken**. Violated. She looked up at Mei, still blissfully humming as she measured out spices for the fried chicken.

*Can I tell her? Can I **not**?*

A quiet “*Oh.*” was all Ranko could get past her lips as she slumped onto one of the metal stools in front of the prep counter, her body limp as a sack of potatoes.

“Well, glad to see **you’re** so excited, Ran-chan.” Mei scoffed, flicking a fingerful of flour in Ranko’s direction and leaving a few splotches of white on Ranko’s black sweater.

Ranko did not seem amused by her antics, though, and her eyes had significantly clouded with a dark sadness in the space of a few heartbeats.

Mei waved her hand in front of the redhead’s face. “Hellooooo-o? Earth to Ranko! What got into you all of a sudden? I thought you were supposed to be Little Miss Holly Jolly today, anyway.”

Ranko swallowed hard, reaching across the metal countertop for her sister’s hand. The look in her eyes was deadly serious. “Mei, you... you shouldn’t see this guy anymore.”

The elder girl’s demeanor changed instantly, the anger and frustration returning to her eyes. “Why **not?! He’s** amazing, and he’s actually interested in **me**. I mean, he asked **me** out; I didn’t even have to chase him. He makes me feel special!”

Ranko sighed despondently. She couldn’t tell her the truth. She wanted to, but doing so would admit what Mikado had done to her, and also tie a direct line back to her former life. She didn’t imagine it would be that difficult to look up in the records to see just **to whom** the Golden Pair of figure skating had suffered their only defeat. At least, the victor’s name wouldn’t have been recorded as Ranko Tendo, but a photograph would be hard to deny.

“I just have a bad feeling about him, okay? Please, Mei... just trust me.”

Mei slammed the plastic bin down on the counter, a cloud of flour poofing out at its sides. “You’ve never even **met** him!”

If only, Ranko thought to herself. “It’s not like...”

“I’ve **finally** got somebody that’s interested in me, who’s not a total dirtbag and an addict, and all you can do is tell me not to see him?! Why can’t you just be **happy** for me? Did I tell you to back off when you were floating on clouds about maybe dating **a girl?** Honestly, Ranko, I can’t **believe** you!”

Ranko’s eyes widened. *Ouch. Low blow, sis. Fuck, how do I...* “I... I just don’t want to see you get hurt, okay?”

Mei roared at her in anger, rocking the redhead back in shock. “Who are you to tell me what I can and can’t do!? After everything we’ve done for you?! You’ve barely been here a **month**, and all of a sudden you’re everybody’s **perfect little princess!** You’ve got the whole place revolving around you, and so excuse me if I found the last person left in Tokyo that isn’t too busy worshipping **you** to notice anybody **else!**”

Ranko gasped, reaching out for her sister again. “Mei, I...”

The saloon door opened and Yui peeked inside, just as Mei thrust the clear plastic container forward with a furious scream, coating Ranko’s face and sweater with flour and spices. “Just **forget it!** I’m **out of here!**” Mei threw her arm up at Yui over the countertop. “Go on, **Ranko!** Your **adoring fans** await!” The blue-haired young woman spun on the heels of her white tennis shoes and crashed through the steel back door with a loud *bang*, leaving it hanging halfway open as she turned to run down the alley toward the street.

“What in the actual **hell** was that about?” Yui made her way down the hallway, her heels making ominous *clacking* songs as they approached her coughing youngest sister.

Ranko coughed as she turned on her stool to face Yui, tears beginning to form in her right eye and streak through the thin dust of flour covering her face. She was crying so much more since she became a girl, and she didn’t like it at all. *I can’t believe how quickly Mei turned on me. If only she knew what he did to me. What he tried to do to Akane. Who he really is. Mei was right to be angry, though. All I had to do was tell her, and I wasn’t brave enough to open my damn mouth.*

“She, um...” Ranko wiped her face with a scratchy brown paper towel, wincing as its rough texture scraped over her skin. “She’s got a boyfriend.”

Yui’s stance softened a little, but her face wrinkled in perplexity. “That’s what’s got her so pissed off? She’s... *happy?! How’s that* happen, exactly?”

Ranko shook her head. “I’ve got a **bad feeling** about this guy, Yui. I tried to tell her, and...” She gestured to the open door.

Yui frowned, looking her sister over as if seeking some hidden information that might be written on her face somewhere. “Do you know something about him?”

Ranko swallowed hard, with an audible *gulp* Yui heard from a full meter away. *All I have to do is say it, and... I just can’t. He’s a creeper, Yui. He hits girls and quits ‘em. He takes without asking. He’s an honorless scumbag.* Akane and untold hundreds of people in that arena at Kolhotz High had seen how he shamed her. She couldn’t bear one more person knowing, especially one who could carry that knowledge into her new life. *I can’t have Yui and all of them look at me like Pop, and even Nabiki and Kasumi, did once they found out. I can’t stand the thought of them laughing at me. Mocking me. Looking at me with disgust in their eyes, like I’m some sort of....* She couldn’t even bear to finish the thought in her mind, let alone give it voice. “It’s just a feeling.”

“You gotta be careful with stuff like that, Ranko! Clearly, she’s really upset!” The blonde barkeep sighed, beginning to brush loose flour from the countertop into a nearby trash can with her hand.

Ranko nodded. “I know, and I feel terrible. I just don’t want her to get hurt.”

Yui stepped forward and put a hand on Ranko’s shoulder, brushing some flour off of

her black sweater onto the floor. “Sometimes, you gotta let people make their own decisions. Be there for them if things go bad, but don’t go around assuming the worst and make them doubt the good things when they come. Besides, it’s entirely possible you’re wrong about this guy.”

Ranko desperately wanted any hope to hold on to, for Mei’s sake, that Yui might have a point. However frantically she searched her mind for it, she could find none.

Akane walked briskly down the sidewalk, shivering from the cold. It was getting dark, and the December chill sliced through her school uniform like a naginata. She idly whistled the tune of Tatsuro Yamashita's *Christmas Eve*, smiling at the colored lights draped over the balcony railing of an apartment she passed. *Man, that freaking song is everywhere this year. Those stupid train commercials, just every five freakin' minutes.*

Pulling her black coat tighter around herself to guard against an icy gust, she smiled wistfully down at the Shakujii River, its water a dark snake cutting through a concrete channel opposite the chain-link fence to her left. *So many times walking to school, Ranma ended up falling in there. Heck, half the time, I threw him in there myself. And out would pop...* She felt her cheeks warm despite the chill in the air at the thought of the redheaded girl with whom she'd recently reconnected.

I wish I could call her. I can't risk calling the bar from home, but... maybe a payphone? She glanced down at her wristwatch, sighing in disappointment. *Damn. It's almost six. They'll be opening any minute. She'll be too busy to talk, between her tables and singing.* Akane smiled gently at the thought of her once-betrothed swaying on that tiny corner stage, beaming with joy and waving to the crowd. *I wonder what Izumi's got her wearing tonight.* She closed her eyes, breathing deep of the frigid December air and wrapping her arms around herself, imagining a slender redhead between them.

She giggled as she kicked a pebble along the sidewalk. *Gods, what's gotten into me? When she was here with us, back when she was... when there was a chance, all I could think of most days was getting Dad to let me out of being stuck with Ranma Saotome. And now that she's a...*

Akane turned her eyes to the southeast, staring up at the stars beginning to peek through the encroaching darkness. She half-expected to see spotlights dancing in the sky, beacons calling out to anyone who might follow them to a two-story brick building near the harbor, and within, the most beautiful thing in the Minato district. She bit her lip softly, shaking her head and turning back toward home. *Ranko Tendo, what have you done to me?!*

The high schooler sighed, turning her gaze from an office building. Both of the bushes flanking the walkway up to its front door were wrapped in colored lights and pocked with red and white glass balls. *She was only with us for a year or two, but it already doesn't feel like Christmas around here without her.*

Gods, I miss her.



Kasumi hummed to herself as she cleared the dinner table. Everything had been so peaceful at home lately, and she was glad for it, wrong though it felt sometimes. She felt terrible every time she allowed herself to associate the dramatic reduction in yelling, fighting, destroyed furniture, and general chaos permeating her home with the day that Ranma left. Of course, she missed Ranma, and still prayed often for his safety, wherever he might be. *I hope he's at least found somewhere safe to spend the holidays, especially with the forecasts predicting more winter storms for the coming week*, she fretted.

"Oh, Father? I forgot to ask you. What would you like me to make for dinner on Saturday? I'll need to go to the store tomorrow to make sure I have time to get everything ready."

Soun smiled up at his eldest daughter. *She's becoming more and more the image of her mother every day*, he thought with a proud sigh. "Whatever you think is best, Kasumi. I have every confidence in you."

Akane looked up from the television. "What's so special about Saturday?"

The Tendo patriarch chuckled, leaning over the table and reaching for his tea cup. "Well, Akane, as you know, the city council elections are early next year, and the mayor wants me to run again. More than that, though, he thinks I'd be well-suited to run for mayor myself, since he's retiring after his term ends. He's asked if he could come by for dinner and talk about it with me soon."

Akane grinned, turning excitedly to face her father from her cushion on the floor. "Wow, really, Dad? **Mayor?** That's great! I'm so proud of you!"

Soun chuckled, tamping down her enthusiasm with a downward wave of his hand. "Now, now, Akane, I haven't even decided if I'm going to run, let alone gotten any votes. But I have to admit, it's interesting, and we could certainly use the city salary since the dojo has been so quiet of late." He smiled happily at his girls. "I was actually hoping the three of you would all be here. I'd love to introduce the whole family to Mayor Dato."

His youngest daughter beamed, nodding emphatically. "Dad, that would be..."

Nabiki glared at her sister behind their father's back, making a throat-slitting gesture in her direction as she side-eyed the giant panda seated at the far end of the dining table. .

Akane blinked in surprise, but caught her sister's hint. "... I don't know, Dad. *Maybe?* It's this Saturday, you said?"

Nabiki walked out from behind her father and sat on the tabletop, crossing her legs with her typical brash air. "I'm terribly sorry, Daddy, but Akane and I already have plans. The sorority I'm joining is going to have a lot of girls graduate this year, and they're hoping to recruit my little sister to replenish the ranks."

Akane shook her head in surprise, making a confused gesture to Nabiki out of her father's view. "Uh, yeah! Nabiki, crap, was that *this* Saturday? It slipped my mind. Could we maybe do dinner with the mayor Sunday instead, Dad?"

Soun stammered, glancing up at Kasumi. "Well, I suppose I could ask him. I mean, if you're both too busy for the **mayor**..." *How is it that my youngest daughters have fuller social calendars than I do?*

His middle daughter nodded, shrugging her shoulders in her father's direction. "You know how it is, Daddy. Availability is the price of popularity. That advice is free, but if you want me to help you manage your campaign, we'll have to come to some other arrangement." She smirked confidently, winking to her sister. Having captured Akane's attention, Nabiki hopped off the table to her feet and made her way to the stairway, ascending it and lingering in the hallway between her room and Akane's.

"Well, I'd better get upstairs! Lots of homework to do tonight! Thanks for dinner, Kasumi!" Akane stood, stretching her back and making for the stairs. As she reached the second floor landing, she rolled her eyes in her sister's direction, looking Nabiki over suspiciously. "Okay, Nabiki. Mind explaining why you just made me lie to our father and blow off the freaking **mayor**?! We don't have plans on Saturday night!"

Nabiki grinned deviously. "What are you talking about, little sister? *Sure* we do."

Akane growled, stomping her foot in her frustration. "What are you talking about?! I'm **not** going to some stupid *sorority party*! Who has the time for frivolous crap like that?"

The lithe brunette cackled in amusement. "Oh, Akane. I said we had plans. I didn't say we have the **same** plans." She reached into the pocket of the green puffy vest she wore over her orange sweater, pulling out a Polaroid photograph and waving it in the air. "But you **do**, in fact, have somewhere to be."

Akane groaned in exasperation. "Would you please just stop with the games?! I'm not going to pay you for your stupid picture, okay, Nabiki?! Just tell me what this is all about!"

Nabiki sneered in self-satisfaction, leaning her backside on the wall between her bedroom door and Akane's and nonchalantly crossing her ankles. "Oh, my dear little sister, there's no charge. Not this time. Let's call this one an early Christmas present." She handed Akane the photo. "I'll let Daddy know you'll be at the sorority house with me until morning." She winked with another mischievous smile, popping her back off of the wall and quickly slipping into her room, closing the door behind her.

Honestly! She's so smug about this kind of stuff! Akane turned over the Polaroid

photo in her hand, her facial expression changing from fury, to confusion, and then to warmth. The picture depicted a chaotic jumble of colored papers on a college campus bulletin board. There were multiple flyers announcing that people were giving away old furniture. A yellow sheet with several tear-off tags at the bottom bearing the same phone number offered calculus tutoring. A black-and-white photocopied picture of a poorly-drawn demon in a stone archway was overlaid with text seeking people to play something called Dungeons and Dragons. A formal-looking scroll of nearly-packed kanji blared that the college's kendo team was holding open try-outs on December 23rd. And, at the dead center of the photo hung a hand-drawn advertisement promoting a special Christmas party and concert Saturday night at the Phoenix.

Akane's heart leapt with excitement. *I might actually get to spend Christmas, or at least a little of it, with Ran... her!* She hugged the photo tight to her chest, grinning up at the little duck dangling from a nail on Nabiki's closed bedroom door. *Mercenary though she can be, when I least expect it, Nabiki can always find a way to surprise me with her kindness. You can try to hide it from the world, and let everybody think you're a heartless bitch, but... You're still my big sister, and you're always looking out for me. Thanks, Nabiki.*

She slipped into her room, closing and locking her bedroom door and throwing open her voluminous closet. *A real concert? Ranko?! I bet she's going to be amazing. She's gonna be perfect. Gods, what the hell am I gonna wear?!*

Ranko grumbled to herself, taking a long draught of her room-temperature tea. She wished she had some rocket fuel to pour into it. Between worrying for Mei's safety, her crushing sense of guilt at not being more forthcoming about her history with Mikado, and preparing for the concert to save the bar starting in just forty hours, she hadn't slept a wink in days. Mei hadn't come into work since her argument with Ranko, so the Phoenix had been short-staffed and more hectic than usual, to boot.

If this is a joke, Mama, I'm not laughing. This is ridiculous. Ranko's groan echoed in the empty bar room as she leaned forward on her stool, her elbows resting atop the main bar counter. Hana had instructed her to be up and dressed by 8:30 in the morning, though for what reason, she had not said. Still, Ranko was not about to disappoint her boss and benefactor, so she had done as she was told. She wore a businesslike blue blazer and matching pencil skirt over a cream-colored button-down shirt, all of which Izumi had brought for her the night before and insisted she wear for whatever the unknown occasion was. She hated the outfit; it was tight in the wrong places and itchy everywhere on her hypersensitive skin.

She heard a key in the front door lock and looked up as a stream of sunlight poured through the double doors. Ranko lifted her hand to shield her eyes as Hana stepped into the room, doffing her aviator sunglasses. At least, Ranko *thought* it was Hana. She barely recognized the old barkeep dressed as she was. Hana wore a pair of mid-gray nylon slacks and a matching suit jacket over a jewel-tone blue button-down blouse, the top button of her collar left open. Her short platform heels clacked loudly on the wooden floor of the empty bar, and her just-longer-than-shoulder-length salt-and-pepper hair was held back with a series of barely-visible hairpins.

"You don't have to stare, you know," Hana said with a smirk down at her youngest ward.

Ranko shook her head, blinking the drowsiness from her eyes. "Oh! I'm sorry, Mama! I've just... never seen you dressed like that before! It works for you."

Hana nodded, an amused chuckle escaping her lips. "I can clean up when I **have** to, I just don't **like** to. Now, let's have a look at **you**." She walked in a half-circle around Ranko's bar stool. "I think that'll work, yeah. Not bad, kiddo."

The redhead rolled her eyes. "I'm happy to please, not that I got much of a choice. Izumi didn't exactly make it sound like there was any room for debate on my wardrobe choices." *Today, or basically ever*, she thought with a slight flush of her cheeks. "So, when do I get to find out what we're actually doing at stupid-o-clock in the morning?"

Hana laughed heartily. "Tell you on the way. C'mon, you." She offered a hand to help Ranko off the stool. She had seen enough flight attendants and secretaries dismount the brown vinyl stools in pencil skirts to know that the transition could

prove tricky even when one wasn't filled with bourbon at the moment.

The teen blushed furiously; the idea of being helped with such a basic maneuver owing to her clothing felt so feminine, and dependent, and *weird*. She'd reached a point where she didn't **always** hate it, but it was still a foreign experience for her.

Hana led her young charge out the front door, locking it behind them with her key. Following the Phoenix matriarch's lead, Ranko began walking in the direction of the train station. In a bid to amuse herself and take her mind off of her anxiety, she hopped up onto a long concrete seating ledge along the sidewalk, walking alongside Hana at eye level with the taller woman.

"Don't you think you should get down from there? What if you fall?" Hana smiled up at her martial artist daughter with a slightly disbelieving shake of her head.

Ranko smirked confidently in response. "Yeah, you're probably right." She hopped up from the seat of the long bench and continued walking, without breaking stride or slowing, along the top of the thin back rail of the bench instead.

The old barkeep rolled her eyes. "Okay, showoff, I get the idea. Now get down here before you hurt yourself."

The young lady, as she was being reminded to play the part of, stepped down next to her. "Yes, **ma'am**." Her father would have had a heart attack and died at the thought of his child following instructions from an elder without a fight – but then again, he had never tried actual respect in his dealings with her. "So... where are we going? What's with the fancy duds and everything?"

Hana smiled, disarmingly. "We're going to the library."

Ranko nearly face planted. "You... You got me dressed up like a secretary, and out here before the sun has had its friggin' coffee, to go stare at some **dusty-ass books?!**"

The older woman laughed, shaking her head. "Of course not, honey. We have a meeting."

Ranko blinked in confusion. "About what?"

"About **you**," came Hana's reply as she pulled open the glass door of the train station.

"Yeah? What does the freakin' library want with **me**, anyway?" Ranko looked legitimately confused. *I've never known books to issue challenges before, but stranger things have happened in my life, I guess.*

Hana dropped a pair of coins into the turnstile, leading Ranko through it and onto the train platform. "It's about your education."

The teen's mouth fell open incredulously. "Wait, **what?!** I'm not even in school anymore."

"I know. But we need to do something about that, young lady." Hana smiled reassuringly down at the teen, offering her a hand as Ranko stepped up onto the train.

Ranko shuddered with the memory of the night she left the Tendo home, staring up at Nabiki's old teal school pinafore. *She couldn't... She **wouldn't** try to send me back to high school after everything, as a **girl**, would she?! There's gonna be questions, and stares, and probably some groupies, and girls who would expect me to know how to behave, and guys who... well, who don't know how to behave around girls.* "But... I **can't** go back to school. I told you, I was so far back, it was ridiculous."

Hana patted her young charge's knee as they took their seats on the metro train. "I know, honey. Which is why we're going to do it another way. We're going to come up with a plan to get you caught up, and when you're ready, we will either get you enrolled in classes, or you'll take your equivalency exams and get your diploma. I promised you we would. The person we're meeting with today is an advisor who will help us get you on the right trajectory."

"But, I don't need school, or some test. I'm happy right where I am! Besides, you need me there to help with work stuff!" Ranko pouted, looking out the window as the Minato cityscape began to pick up speed zooming past.

Hana cocked her head. "Oh?! So you want to wait tables and have drunk guys grabbing at your ass for the rest of your life? What's your career plan beyond that?"

Ranko blushed in embarrassment. She really had no plan, and Hana knew it. *There is one aspect of my job that I wouldn't hate making a career out of. I'd feel like an idiot even saying it out loud, though. That ain't ever gonna happen.* With a defeated frown, she turned back to Hana. "I... I guess not."

"That's better. I don't want you to be scared about this, baby." Hana squeezed the redhead's hand tightly, giving it a reassuring little bounce in her lap. "You are behind through no fault of your own. None of this was your mistake, or your choice, and there isn't any shame in it. But we **do** need to fix it for you, little star. There's no time limit on this, either. We will help you every step of the way, and if we have to hire tutors to help you, we will find a way to do that, too."

Ranko blushed yet again. "I guess. I just don't know why it's such a big deal. I've been doin' okay so far."

Hana groaned in mock frustration. "Because you're a smart girl, Ranko, and you deserve better than slinging beer until you're forty. I want you to be able to do something you're proud of."

The redhead blinked, taking a moment to process what she'd heard. She didn't think anyone had ever called her **smart** before, and especially not a smart **girl**. She was learning to feel a little more comfortable every day in her new life, but hearing someone actually call her a **girl** out loud sometimes still made her feel as awkward and false as she did the first day she stepped out of that damned puddle in China. "Like... like what?"

Hana smiled, squeezing the teen's hand again. "Like literally anything you put your mind to, honey. I have every confidence that you can. We just need to help get you some of the tools you're missing so you can get there." She looked down into the young waitress' eyes with a sincere and serious expression. "I mean it, Ranko. I know your whole life was planned out for you before, and you didn't get an awful lot of say in the matter. I want you to know that you are allowed to dream for yourself now. Pick a dream, any dream, as long as it's yours and yours alone, and you can chase it. That's your right as a woman. And whatever you decide, we'll all be behind you and beside you the whole way."

My right... as a woman? To hear Pop talk about it, I didn't even get any rights as a dude. Ranko sighed at the mention of *dreams*. Hers hadn't been especially pleasant of late. "**All** of you? Even Mei?"

Hana rolled her eyes. "Yeah, even her. She's just being protective of her boyfriend. I don't know why you are so worried about him, but I'm sure you two will work it out. She loves you just like your other sisters do."

Ranko opened her mouth to speak, but no sound came out. *Why can't I just tell them? He hurt me. I stopped him from hurting me again, and hurting Akane. I won. So, why am I so damned ashamed? I could end this right now, and I'm too much of a fucking coward.*

The overhead speaker chimed to indicate their stop, and Hana stood, Ranko behind her. "Come on, young lady. Let's go find you a dream."

Hana's young ward blushed and followed where she led. The pair exited the train station, crossing the street and entering the library building. Hana walked up to the circular oak receptionist desk, Ranko in tow. "Hello, good morning? My daughter and I have an appointment with Ryuki Kagawa, please?"

The young male receptionist began to search the appointment book, and Ranko just stood there, her head spinning as if she'd been hit in the face with a board.

*D... **daughter?! I've been calling Hana Mama on and off for a few weeks, just to show respect. Just like when Akane called the old freak 'Grandfather' Happosai. Being comfortable with the idea of being referred to as a girl, or a woman, is taking some getting used to, but I'm getting there. But... being someone's **daughter?! Like, having someone who sees me as a girl, isn't disgusted by it, and actually wants to claim me? Up until the day I left the Tendos' place, six months after what happened on the mountain, Pop still called me **my boy** without fail. That Amazon witch left me a wound that will never heal, and Pop couldn't help but rub salt in it every chance he got.*****

After years of her father expressing disdain anytime she made any effort to make peace with her feminine half, and the constant warnings that her mother would disown her - or worse - if she ever suspected that her child displayed any feminine tendencies whatsoever, Ranko had always just taken as fact that there was a part of her that would never find acceptance. But there, in that moment, there was Hana, dressed up all professional and serious-like, telling someone that she was her **daughter** with a straight face. She wasn't embarrassed. There was no disgust or

derisiveness. She actually sounded... **proud?**

*Sure, it's not like there was a legal adoption, or even that she's even using what the government would consider my real name. But it doesn't even matter. I'm stuck as a girl, sure, but for the first time in my life, someone sees me like I am and... **wants me anyway?!***

The singular word - *daughter* - brought the gift of validation to the impossible hope with which she'd left the Tendo home: that despite how freakish the circumstances that had befallen her were, if she were only willing to leave the cursed and broken boy behind, that she just might get to live as just a normal, regular, *totally non-weird* person. *Sure, that normal person spends most of her time in skirts now, but she doesn't have to spend it hiding from crazy Amazons, poisoned roses and razor gymnastics ribbons, exploding rocks, prose-slinging swordsmen and panty-thieving ghouls. She doesn't wake up daily to the reminders of what a disappointment she is to her family,* she thought, her mind racing with possibilities. To Ranko, those few syllables meant acceptance, trust, pride, love, and so many other good feelings that she had been chasing hopelessly for years. At that moment, she doubted anything in the world could have made her happier than being a *daughter*.

"Miss Tendo? Ranko?"

Ranko shook her head to jog herself back into the moment, looking up into the eyes of a concerned-looking older woman in a frumpy floral dress.

"Are you all right, dear?" The kindly-looking old woman peered over the rims of her glasses at the young redhead.

Ranko blushed furiously. "Yes, ma'am, I'm so sorry. I... just didn't sleep much last night." She bowed respectfully. *Twenty minutes ago, I was laughing this off, but now, even if the whole thing blows up in my face, no matter what I do, I can't embarrass Han... **Mama...** after she claimed me as her own.* She rose from the bow, giving her most demure, sincere smile up at the administrator. *This is about **my family's honor** now.*

"Ah, to be young." The elderly woman smiled, motioning to Ranko and Hana to follow her to a small cubicle in the back corner of the administrative area of the library. "So, Ranko, your mother told me what she could about your educational history, but there are some pretty big gaps. In fact, we couldn't even find your *birth records* or family registry anywhere, let alone any school transcripts."

Ranko gulped. *This is going to take some fancy dancing,* she fretted as she took one of the two leather chairs across the desk from Ms. Kagawa. "Firstly, please understand that this is no fault of... Miss Hana's," Ranko began. "My father and I traveled constantly, from the time I was five or so, including a lot of time we spent out of the country. So, I missed a lot of time in school, my school records are hard to come by, and I honestly couldn't even tell you what city I was born in. But, my pop..."

She thought about how to handle the next part for a moment, finally grunting in resolution. *At least in this version of the story, he'll get the blame he deserves.* "My

father abandoned me about nine months ago, and I was living on the street until Miss Hana took me in.” She smiled reverently up into Hana’s beaming eyes.

The old woman frowned. “My gods, you **poor thing!** And, what about your situation now? Are you alright? Is everything working out where you are now?”

Ranko smiled gratefully up and to her right again, where Hana listened to the story with riveted attention. *I guess parts of this are news to her, too*, Ranko realized. “Oh, yes, Miss Kagawa.” She reached to her right, squeezing Hana’s hand and trying to say with her eyes all that she could only summarize in words. “She has been the absolute **best mother** a girl could ask for. I am so incredibly lucky that she found me.”

Hana smiled back, looking away after a long moment and lifting her fingertips to her left eye.

The administrator smiled. “That’s wonderful to hear, sweetheart, and bless you, ma’am, for having the kindness to look after her like that. I would love to help you get back on track with all of this, but we’re going to have to start from the beginning and try to get you some sort of identification. I can’t even file the paperwork to get you started without it. You’ll need to go to the Department of Family Services for that, and they’re closed for holidays until the new year. If you have any family that you can still get in touch with and see if they have any of your records, that will make the process a whole lot easier. Otherwise, we will have to almost rebuild your identity from scratch!”

Ranko’s face broke out in a broad grin. *That’s exactly what I want, and all I have to do to get it is... nothing.*

Ms. Kagawa continued. “If we’re unable to find your school records, that’s an easier problem to solve. We can give you a placement test in a few weeks. Don’t worry about studying for it; the intent is not to grade you, but only to see what areas you still need academic work on. Our agency can then put you in touch with tutors and provide textbooks and other curriculum support to help you catch up any skill sets or refresh things you may have forgotten after not using them for a while. When you think you’re ready, we can either enroll you in school, or you can take another exam to demonstrate basic academic competencies. If you choose that route, once you pass that exam, you’ll receive a certificate that is functionally equivalent to a high school diploma. You can use it for most colleges, job applications, or anything else you need.”

The kindly woman flipped the page on her desk blotter calendar, peering ahead to the following month. “How about we do the placement exam on January twelfth? That’ll give you a few weeks to get the identification paperwork sorted out, too.”

Ranko looked up at Hana for confirmation, and receiving a nod, she smiled at the registrar. “Sounds great! Thank you **so much!**”

The gray-haired woman stood slowly and arthritically, giving Hana and Ranko a grandmotherly smile. “You are so welcome, sweetheart. It was truly an honor to meet you both. Have a wonderful holiday.”

Ranko bowed politely. “You too!”

The pair exited the building, Ranko breathing a sigh of relief. *That could have gone a lot more painfully than it did*, she thought. *I was so worried they’d accuse me or Hana of fraud or something, without having any documentation to back up anything we said. Especially because what documentation I did have didn’t match a damn thing I said... which is why I burned all that shit weeks ago.*

Hana looked down to the young redhead, hugging her about the shoulders with one arm. “Do you have **any idea** how proud of you I am?!”

Ranko stopped walking, turning to face her sincerely. “I... think so, even though I don’t always understand why. But, I meant what I said back there. I promise, I’m never going to stop trying to be worthy of everything you have done for me. I’m never going to stop trying to *earn* your pride. When you called me your... **daughter**... Mama, I thought I was gonna cry.”

Hana leaned down, kissing Ranko on the top of her head through her braided red hair. “Me too, honey. **Me too.**”

“Please watch your step while exiting the platform. Thank you.” A merry little chime alerted Ranko and her mother to the opening of the automatic train doors, and the redhead rose to her feet.

Ranko winced slightly, the backs of her legs having uncomfortably stuck to the vinyl seats under the borrowed pencil skirt she wore. *Ow. Stupid Cat’s Tongue.*

The two well-dressed women stepped off the train and onto the platform. Ranko looked around, sighing softly as she followed Hana clear of the platform and toward the main concourse. She noticed Hana checking her wristwatch, probably for the fourth or fifth time since they’d left the library. *She got a hot date or something?* Ranko wondered. *Honestly, I can’t believe she even set this meeting up right now; between getting ready for the concert, the holidays and everything, it just doesn’t seem like the most important thing.* Her concerted expression gave way to a blush.

Hana motioned to a little cafe nestled into the corner of the station, just beyond the ticket booth. “You hungry, kiddo? We could grab a quick bite if you want. I just **know** you didn’t get up early enough for breakfast before getting ready so early.”

Ranko shrugged nonchalantly. “I’m okay, but we can stop if you wanna.” In reality, she hadn’t been eating much the last few days. Between concert preparations and the impending threat of an encounter with Mikado Sanzenin, she’d been running on pure adrenaline for the better part of a week.

Hana nodded. “Yeah, I could go for a tamagoyaki.” She meandered over toward the order window, making and paying for her selection, leaving Ranko leaning against the gray metal railing overlooking the tracks and watching the trains come in. The teen seemed deep in thought.

After a few moments, the owner of the Phoenix returned from the order window, a white paper tray of folded egg in her hand. Her youngest adopted daughter was not where Hana had left her, however. “Ranko?” She craned her neck, scanning the crowd for the telltale shock of red hair, but she did not spy it. *Maybe she went to the bathroom?*

Hana walked toward the restroom, waiting a moment, and when no one she recognized emerged, she looked around again. Her eye caught on a dark little alcove, off of the narrow corridor leading from the main concourse to the restrooms. Sticking out into the entranceway at about knee height was a familiar black chunky heel. *Ranko?* Hana crept to the entrance of the darkened nook, as quietly as she could in her own heels. There, she found the young redhead, curled up in almost the fetal position on a slatted bamboo bench opposite a pair of dusty, inoperative vending machines that had been stored in the disused space. *“There you are, little star. You disappeared on me.”*

The redhead nodded, sitting up on the bench and scooting over to one side to make room for her. "Sorry, Mama. I was just..." She shrugged, deciding the rest of her sentence was unimportant and not worth finishing.

Hana sat next to her daughter, offering her a bite of tamagoyaki with her wooden chopsticks. Ranko shook her head in polite declination, so Hana popped it into her mouth, speaking as she chewed. "What are you doing, hiding in here? You okay, kiddo? What's buggin' ya?"

Ranko frowned, looking down in shame at her hands. "*Sorry. I was just thinking.*" She brushed a fleck of dust from the navy skirt she'd borrowed from Izumi. "*I... used to sleep here sometimes, if it was too cold outside or it was raining or something.*"

The elder woman frowned, looking around the bleak little corner of the train station with a new perspective. "You're never going to have to do anything like that again, honey. You're never going to be *alone* again. Look at me." She waited for Ranko's eyes to lift to meet hers before continuing. "I mean it. I **promise**, Ranko."

Hana set her tray of food down on the bench at her right hip, turning on the seat to face her young ward. "Hey, you know you can talk to me, right?" Hana rested her hand on her daughter's shoulder. "C'mon. What's going on in there? I know you've got a lot on your plate right now with the show, this new exam thing, and whatever's happening between you and Mei."

Ranko sighed. The situation with Mei and Mikado was eating her up, not only with worry over Mei getting hurt, but with her own memories of her assailant being dredged up. *If I tell them, and they pressure Mei to break it off with him, it'll be like I'm asking them to trust me over her. Mei already thinks I'm getting favoritism from them. It'll just make things worse and push her further away from me. Why can't I just... why can't I admit what he did to me? Why can't I be brave enough?* She looked up into Hana's eyes again. "I'm sorry I'm such a mess."

Hana's shoulders slumped as she swallowed a bite of egg. "Hey. Knock that off now. C'mon." She reached out, stroking the teen's flame-red hair. "All of us are a mess, baby. You, me, all your sisters, hell, **most** people in the world. I'd take it all away from you if I could. Every single thing that's hurting you, or scaring you, or haunting you. But, I'm also grateful for the fact that one day, you woke up on this bench, and decided to make your life better. One day, you got up off of this bench and wandered into my bar looking for a job." She cupped her hand around Ranko's cheek. "And because you did - because you made that choice to look for something better - I got to meet my **incredible** little girl."

The redhead threw herself forward, wrapping her arms around Hana and squeezing her around the midsection. "*Thank you. For the... for... thank you.*"

The old barkeep smiled, stroking her child's hair and putting her arm over her back. "Oh, Ranko, honey, you're so welcome." As she turned her body into the hug, she knocked her half-eaten tray of tamagoyaki to the floor. *Whatever. I really wasn't all that hungry anyway; I was just trying to kill a little time. But, it should be late enough now, I think.* "C'mon, precious. You about ready to get out of here, and go **home**?"

Ranko sat up, putting on a bright smile that was only slightly betrayed by her welling eyes. She did have plenty of reasons to smile, she realized, even when the reasons not to were the ones currently dominating her thoughts. "You bet!"



Hana slid her key into the lock of the glass door painted with her name, fumbling with it clumsily for a moment before turning it in the lock and pushing the door open. She held it open for her daughter.

As Ranko entered the main bar area of the Phoenix, she noticed that the aluminum stepladder and some of the other tools they'd used while decorating had been pulled out again. *Maybe Ayako found some more decorations to put up? No, that's not it...* She realized she no longer heard the attract music loop coming from the Pac-Man arcade machine in the back. *Did it break? Mei's gonna have a conniption.*

Hana stopped walking near the main bar counter, just watching the young redhead from behind with an excited smile. *I wonder how long it'll take her to notice what changed,* she thought as she pulled off her blazer and hung it over the back of a bar stool.

As Ranko approached the little alcove, she stopped suddenly. The arcade machine was completely gone, and so was the purple-felted billiards table. In their place were three six-top tables and chairs. They perfectly matched the ones that filled the rest of the bar, but Ranko had been through every centimeter of the bar she called home, and she knew they had no spares. The tables had to have been moved from *somewhere*. She looked back to the main room, counting the rows. *Four, five, six, sev... no! The seventh row of tables is missing! Why?* The lights in the back half of the room were turned off, so she hadn't noticed the change at first. She strode to the wall by the service bar and reached out for the light switch. When she flicked it, she gasped quietly as her eyes found the reason for the rearrangement.

The little triangular corner stage with the karaoke machine - her home for the last two months - had been entirely replaced. In place of it, a raised wooden platform now stretched the entire length of the back wall that separated the main bar room from the ladies' restroom. The platform was almost breast-high to Ranko, where the previous didn't even reach her knees, and there were three steps recessed into the right side to ascend it. Two of the large speakers that had previously been propped in the corner so the music could be heard over the arcade machine had been relocated, one on either side of the stage facing into the room from new mounts near the ceiling. Off to one side, near where the arcade machine had been, a small booth had been erected, and all of the sound and lighting control equipment had been moved into it. "What is... **how...**"

The entire front edge of the stage was lined in silver garland, and two large plastic candy canes stood bookending the stage in the back. The posters that had adorned the back wall were gone, leaving a clean backdrop of oak paneling. On the left side of the stage, in the very corner, stood a small, sparsely-but-tastefully decorated

Christmas tree.

She stepped up the stairs, and she heard a loud mechanical **clunk** of a breaker being flipped. The Christmas tree lit up. The colored lights that used to flash patterns on the walls when the music played had been repositioned, pointing up at the center of the platform, where a simple pine stool and a microphone stand waited. The stool also had some silver garland weaved through its legs, and a few red baubles hung from it. Ranko covered her open mouth, taking another step forward. Resting on the stool was a single red rose, with a red ribbon tied around its stem bearing a small paper tag in the shape of a heart. She turned it in the beams of light to read it. Three immaculately calligraphed characters adorned the tag. They read, *for our star*.

“Surprise!”

Ranko turned, and found Yui and Izumi popping up from their hiding positions behind the bar. Both were wearing denim overalls smudged with dirt and wood stain, and Izumi’s hair was tied back in a tight bun.

“You... you guys! **You** did this?”

Yui nodded. “Mm-hmm. Just *barely* finished in time, too. Mama was **supposed** to keep you out for another hour or so.” The blonde rolled her eyes at Hana with a playful smirk of mock judgement.

Hana sighed in exaggerated defeat, shrugging her shoulders with a smirk. “The meeting didn’t take as long as I expected, and I ran out of excuses, Sorry, girls.”

Ranko looked out over the room from her raised vantage point atop her new stage platform, her jaw still slack in disbelief of what had been done for her. “But, how? We couldn’t afford this...”

Yui pointed to the equipment as she spoke. “The lights, speakers, all of that stuff, we already had, we just had to move ‘em.”

Izumi grinned. “As for the stage itself, well, I guess it’s a good thing one of us is marrying a building contractor in a couple months, huh? Kaito built everything. He had to run, but he says he loves ya.”

“Girls, I... I don’t know what to say. It’s **beautiful**. I just... I can’t believe you did this. Thank you *so much*.” Ranko walked up to Yui, then Izumi, and then Hana, hugging them each in turn. “I’ll... I’ll be able to dance now!”

Hana smiled, wrapping her arms around Yui’s shoulders on her left, and Izumi’s on her right. “You deserve it.”

Ranko bit her lip. On one hand, she was absolutely floored with the surprise and the consideration that had been paid to doing it for her at all. On the other hand, it broke her heart that Mei wasn’t there, and she worried that the girls having made such a grand gesture without her input would only add fuel to her jealousy.

Hana looked around at the ladder and other remnants of the construction effort. “Well, since we’re here early, we might as well help get this cleaned up.”

“Of course.” Ranko nodded and started moving toward the pile of tools.

Izumi stopped her with a gentle palm to her sternum, however. “Not in my favorite suit, you’re not. Go get changed, silly.”

Ranko blushed, looking down at her businesslike attire. “You got it!” She turned and rushed up the stairs.



Having changed into a pair of black jeans and a cherry red tee shirt bearing the bar’s trapezoidal firebird logo across its chest, Ranko emerged from her little apartment. Her hair was pulled back in a loose ponytail secured with a short length of white satin ribbon, and she wore a bright smile. *They built me a stage. They’re trying to build me... a life.* She had nearly reached the base of the steps leading down into the hallway separating the kitchen from the front of the house when she heard raised voices.

“Look, we’re doing a concert to try to save this place. It’s kind of important! We had to make it look decent. We’ve all been working our asses off getting ready. **You’d know that if you’d been around at all!**”

Is that Yui? What’s got her so upset? Better hang back. Ranko paused in the hallway, listening to the conversation to determine if it was safe to come out.

The second voice was definitely Mei’s. “Well, **excuse me**, Yui, for finally having a life and not wanting to be here seven days a week until I die, like **you!**”

Yui’s voice responded, sharpened but not to the level of yelling. “Yeah, but you could have told us if you needed time. You just haven’t shown up, and left us short-handed while we’re trying to put this whole thing together and get out of this jam.”

Mei scoffed. “I honestly didn’t think you’d miss me all that much, considering you had **Princess Diva** here to pick up the slack. I swear, it’s like you girls forgot I **exist!**”

Izumi growled in frustration from the direction of the kitchen. “Mei, of course we were going to have to focus on her! She’s **new**. She’s **scared**. She **needs** us! **ALL** of us! Did you hear **me** lose my shit when **you** showed up, and I wasn’t the baby anymore?! Mama slept on the floor next to your bed for a fucking **month**, trying to keep you clean and get you through detox, and not **one** of us complained for a fucking second! We’re all holding that poor kid together with our **bare fucking hands**, and we could **really** use your help, Mei!”

Ranko backed up on the stairs, careful not to make a sound. *It’s even worse than I*

thought. I'm... hurting them, just by being here.

“It’s bad enough that she’s taking over **everything** about this place, but then when I go try to find a little happiness for myself and let her have it, she has to shit all over that, too! Telling me how I shouldn’t be going out with Mikado. Doesn’t she have enough people here to kiss her ass? Does she really need **all four of us** to have our heads up her ass every night, or could I maybe get the **occasional** night off to have a **life?!?”**

Tell her, Ranko. Walk down those last eight steps, right now, look her in the face and tell her. You’re dating a creep. A pervert. A predator. Maybe I could say it like it happened to someone else. Just someone I know. Ranko shook her head. *One look at my face and they’d know I was lying. They’re too perceptive for that, especially Mama.* She hung her head, shaking it slightly. *You’re right to be angry with me, Mei. Not because I’m a jerk. Because I’m a coward.*

“That’s **enough!**” Hana snapped, her voice coming from the direction of her office. “Look, I know you were the youngest here for a long time, and that it can be hard when someone new starts getting attention. But you know what a mess that girl was when she got here. She needed us. She **still** needs us. **All of us.** She misses you something terrible, Mei. Besides, she’s killing herself, trying to put this place on her back and get us out of trouble. She’s been here barely a month, and she’s carrying this family, and **this** is how you treat her?! I’m **disappointed**, Mei.”

“Oh, I’m sure her **throng of adoring fans** will stroke her ego just fine!” Mei growled, and Ranko could hear the slam of what sounded like an aluminum tray being thrown. “Don’t worry. I’ll be here to help tonight, so nobody needs to cry about having to pour a few extra drinks. Oh, and by the way, not that anyone’s all that interested, but Mikado’s coming by for a while tonight with a couple of his friends. Ya know, just in case *my family* cares at all about meeting my *boyfriend*. I’m not really holding my breath, though.”

Ranko gasped, and it felt like the world had begun spinning. She slumped against the wall of the narrow staircase, trying not to make a sound and tip her family off to her eavesdropping. *That jerk, here?! In the only safe place I’ve ever known? What, so he can humiliate me again? I’ve finally got some people in my life who respect me, and...* She swallowed hard. *Go tell them. Walk down the stairs. Tell her. Before he destroys us both.*

She stared at her feet, willing them to move, but they would not.

Hana sighed, and Ranko held her breath as she watched her adoptive mother pass the staircase to join Mei in the kitchen. “We didn’t stop loving you just because we started loving Ranko. We never will. We’re not going to run out of love, baby. There’s enough for everyone. You’re always going to be part of this family, no matter how much it grows. Of **course** we want to meet Mikado. All of us do.”

Ranko ran back up the stairs, grateful she’d passed on Hana’s offer of breakfast. There would be less to throw up.

Ranko waved to the assembled patrons from her new stage platform with a pang of guilt, taking a shallow bow. *I'm sorry, guys. You're not getting my best tonight. I've just... I've got more important things on my mind than pop music right now.* Wherever she went in the room, her eyes were never far off from the table in the far corner by the front door, where Mikado Sanzenin and his two hangers-on: both slender but athletic men in their own right, sat. She might not have had experience with dating guys, but she knew danger when she saw it, especially when it sat in her home with a bottomless pitcher of sake.

I can't believe he hasn't even recognized me. I'm up here singing and dancing like a freakin' idol thirty meters from his table; it's not like I'm going stealth. Did... Did what he did to me mean so little to him that he doesn't even fucking remember me? Was it that casual for him, the way he got inside my head and filled it with fucking demons?!

When Ranko's gaze wasn't on Mikado, it was on his girlfriend. Mei still hadn't had much to say to her in days. *It's not her fault,* Ranko reminded herself as she stepped down from the stage. *She doesn't know, and it's entirely my fault she doesn't know. Singing for two hundred strangers, I can do without a second thought, but having a conversation with my big sister and letting her know she's in danger... that, I'm not brave enough for. Some fucking big, bad martial artist I turned out to be. I'm not even sure she'd believe me if I did tell her, not with how hooked on him she is, and how pissed at me she is.*

She glared up at table one, digging her pink-polished acrylic fingernails into her palm and wincing at the pain. *I'm just glad Mei sat him in her section. If I had to bring that piece of shit a drink, I'd probably spit in it.* Her stomach rolled at the realization that thundered through her mind. *It wouldn't even be the first time he's tasted my spit.*

The redhead rushed between her tables, doing her best to keep them happy while reserving herself as much time as possible. There was just one problem with that – the more popular Ranko's singing had become, the less interested the crowd had become in entertaining themselves with karaoke. Whether she had asked for it or not, the newly-expanded stage had become almost her exclusive domain, and the customers got restless when it wasn't filled. She almost didn't have time to serve tables between songs some nights, and the current shift was one of them.

She had barely dropped off a tray full of empty mugs when some of the more inebriated revelers at the few tables closest to the stage began cheering loudly, willing the platform spanning the length of the ladies' room at the back of the bar to come to life again. Ranko rolled her eyes at Yui, who could only wave her back toward the stage. With an exasperated sigh and a pitiful glance by way of apology at Izumi, who was frantically trying to cover the torrent of drink orders her two youngest sisters kept bringing her at the service bar, Ranko closed the distance to the raised

platform and hopped up the three steps to take her place, picking up her handheld microphone from its stand. The hundreds of sparkly white rhinestones Izumi had glued to its once-smooth handle bit into her hand, and she squeezed it tight, letting the discomfort in her hypersensitive palm help her focus.

“Tell you what, why don’t you guys pick the next song?” Ranko did her best to smile, and the crowd began shouting a cacophony of song titles at her. Hearing one louder voice call out a Japanese pop song she knew by heart, she pointed to the guy who named it. “Yeah, let’s do *One Night in Heaven!* You guys know it, right?” Most of the crowd whooped in the affirmative; the song was new, and it had been getting a lot of play on the radio for the last few weeks. Ranko jogged down the stairs to the karaoke station in the booth where the Pac-Man machine once stood. She leaned over the monitor, pulling up the song and beginning the backing track. The Phoenix’ songstress-in-residence hurried back up to the stage, grateful that the song’s long instrumental intro gave her a few moments to take her position before the lyrics began to change color on the monitor.

As she finished the first verse, she looked up and spied Mei leaning on Mikado’s table talking with him and his friends. Shaking her head slightly and trying to blend it into her choreography, she admonished herself. *Mei doesn’t want you looking after her, and you have a job to do*, she thought to herself before launching into the chorus with a bit more effort. The crowd jubilantly sang along as Ranko gestured with her hands, waving both of them at shoulder height as she’d seen the two members of *Wink* do in the song’s music video.

The songstress’ eyes flashed throughout the room, trying her best to make eye contact with everybody at least once. The couple at table fourteen were going to need refills after the song. Table eighteen had put their menus down; they were likely ready to order. The girl in the green shirt at the bar had probably reached the point at which she shouldn’t be served any more alcohol, and the creepy guy sitting next to her had definitely noticed her incapacitation. Yui was catching up on drink orders, Izumi was running the dishwasher, Hana had disappeared back into her office, and Mei was... *nowhere to be found*.

Almost forgetting to begin the next chorus on time, Ranko searched the darkened room frantically. *Sanzenin’s still in his seat, so everything’s probably okay, but where’s Mei?* Searching the bar back area, she caught a glimpse of the trash can behind Izumi, which was missing its bag. *She must have gone out back to toss it. Okay.* She breathed a sigh of relief – but a short-lived one, because from the corner of her eye, she caught movement from the table at the back. Mikado made a gesture to his friends that anyone who had ever spent time with - or in the case of Ranko, as - a guy recognized as an indication that he was about to do something he wanted his friends to watch. He stood, heading out the glass double doors at the front of the bar and turning left, toward the alley. *This doesn’t smell right at all*, Ranko thought.

The song was coming to a close, and all that remained was one more repetition of the couplets that made up the song’s extended chorus. Thinking on her feet, Ranko waved to the crowd excitedly with a bright, if forced, smile. “Hey! You know the words! Let’s hear you!” She pointed the microphone toward the crowd, and the

exuberant audience got the hint, with a full sixty or so of the bar patrons beginning to sing the lyrics over the steel guitar backing track. As soon as her point had been made, Ranko tossed the scintillating microphone to a middle-aged woman standing near the stage and leapt down, leaving the revelers to finish the song on their own.

Ranko hopped down from the stage without taking the stairs and began pushing her way through the crowd toward the bar.

Yui looked at the young singer crossly as Ranko nearly threw a flight attendant out of her path. “Ranko! The song’s not even over! What the hell are you **doing?!**”

Unable to get around a fat, balding man blocking the gap between the main and service bar counters, Ranko vaulted over the main bar with one hand. She did not especially care if the college coed perched on the closest stool got more of a show than she bargained for under Ranko’s short black dress. She crashed through the slatted blue saloon door without answering Yui, rushing to the back door.

If I’m wrong about this, Mei will never forgive her, but if I’m right, and I don’t act, I’ll never forgive myself, Ranko resolved. It took her about two steps to make up her mind, and as she approached the door, which stood partially ajar admitting the frigid December air into the commercial kitchen, she knew she had chosen correctly.

“Mikado, what are you... Hey, **stop that!** I said **stop!**” Mei’s voice echoed in the chill air of the alleyway.

Ranko slid through the door sideways without touching it, and found Mikado pinning Mei against the red brick wall of the drug store next door to the Phoenix at the far side of the alley. His left hand was holding both of her wrists above her head, and his right was beginning to make its way up her knee-length denim skirt.

Mei turned her face away from him and fought to break free, but the athlete’s powerful grip was too much for her. Her urgent pleas quickly devolved into a desperate whine without discernible words.

“What’s the matter, Mei?” Mikado chuckled darkly, toying with his prey. “I thought you liked m... **urk!**”

One moment, Mikado’s face was centimeters from Mei’s, and the next, it just... *wasn’t*. It took Mei a moment to reorient, and as she did, she found Mikado lying on his back on the snow-covered asphalt.

Ranko, meanwhile, was rising from a sweeping crouch a half-meter or so behind him. Mei was almost afraid to look at her. They hadn’t spoken in days, and now, forget the light dusting of snow covering the gravel of the alley – the fury in Ranko’s eyes would have melted steel.

“Mei, you okay?” Ranko’s eyes did not leave the prone antagonist as she spoke. “C’mere.”

Mei pushed herself off from the wall, giving Mikado a wide berth as she circumnavigated him to reach Ranko’s side. Though they didn’t touch, Mei could

hear in Ranko's breathing that she was shivering; the combination of a light snow, the Full Body Cat's Tongue pressure point, and the thin black minidress she wore was taking its toll on her, not to mention the tidal wave of adrenaline coursing through her.

Mikado stumbled to his feet, and Ranko leveled her arm in front of Mei, pulling her a step back and dropping into a defensive taekwondo stance between the two.

Mei grabbed at her arm. "Ranko, you can't! I told you, he's won hundreds of fights, and only lost **one!**"

Ranko smirked darkly, staring **through** her adversary. She wanted to watch him panic. It was high time he experienced what fear felt like. "Yeah, I know. **Who do you think was the one that beat him?**"

Look at me, you son of a bitch. Ranko sneered, tightening her stance. *Remember me? I think you're gonna find I'm a little bit different than your average girl.*

Mikado rocked on his feet with the realization. "No... It can't be... it is! It **is** you!" He smirked rakishly. "This night just keeps getting better! Back for more, finally? Just couldn't stay away, I suppose? No need to be jealous; *you'll get your turn.*"

Mei opened her mouth to speak, but Ranko's voice broke the silence first. "**Mei, get inside.**" She spoke through gritted teeth, a darkness roiling in her unyielding stare. *How dare he condescend to me, after everything! Tonight, Ranko swore to herself, you're gonna pay. Not only for what you tried to do to Mei, but for what you did to me on that ice.*

Ranko's every muscle was tensed to its maximum, pleading for permission to erupt in righteous fury. She ignored the icy tear streaking its way down her cheek, willing her eyes to produce no more. *You're gonna pay for every single fucking time you've hurt me in my dreams. You've violated me over and over again, and it ends now.* For the first time since the Phoenix Pill was destroyed, she did not fear being struck. She didn't care how much he hurt her, as long as she hurt him *more.*

She adjusted her stance slightly, bringing her arms more to her sides almost casually. Mei did not move, but Ranko's focus was now singular, and she spat her words in a voice icier than the December air at the nightmare made flesh in the alley in front of her. "*I told you last time - if you **ever** laid your hands on me or someone I love again...*" She no longer seemed to feel the cold.

Mikado laughed dismissively. "We'll see about that!" He rushed forward two steps, cocking his right fist back and launching it at Ranko's chest.

She did not move until a split second before his punch struck home, and then at lightning speed, both of her arms pivoted forward from her sides toward his arm, parallel to the ground with her left arm just in front of her right. Her right hand caught his wrist first, thrusting it harmlessly past her body to her left. Her left palm jammed into his elbow from the opposite direction with all the force she could bring to bear, and the alleyway echoed with a snap and a scream.

Ranko spun into a roundhouse kick to his chest that shoved her opponent back a step, and Mei gasped audibly at the sight of the supposedly invincible athlete's right arm now dangling limply at his side, bent the wrong way in the middle.

"You... you **bitch! You broke my fucking arm!**" Mikado roared.

Ranko nodded, finding a vengeful satisfaction in his wailing. "One bone down..."

She swept her left leg behind herself, low to the ground, and took a crouched *pu bu* kung fu stance, inverted to account for her left-handedness with her right leg and arm extended and her left arm poised behind her.

"Two hundred and five to go."

That's right, Ranko thought with a satisfied sneer, reveling in the fear in his eyes. *My name is **Ranko Tendo**, and I'm the demon in **your** nightmares now. You'll never forget me again.* She lifted her extended right arm, curling her fingers and beckoning mockingly in his direction.

With any semblance of strategy lost to his rage and the loss of his dominant arm, Mikado roared in fury and rushed her wildly. For a split second, Ranko had considered letting him off with just the one injury. Unfortunately for Mikado, that second was now over, and worse still, he had badly misjudged the momentum of his charge. Ranko knew that all of Mikado's martial arts experience and muscle memory involved fighting on frictionless ice, but on solid ground, the advantage was hers.

The lithe redhead easily sidestepped his charge, sweeping at his legs. Mikado stumbled forward, crashing headlong into the brick back wall of the Phoenix. Before he could turn to face her, he felt a sharp kick as Ranko dug her heel into his lower back, driving him forward against the bricks.

"How's it feel when **you're** the one being **put up against a wall, bitch?!**" Ranko jeered as she twisted her ankle, eliciting a grunt of pain from the figure skater.

"There!"

Ranko turned her head at the sound of voices, finding Mikado's two friends from the bar approaching from the direction of the Phoenix' front door. One wore a blue polo shirt, the other a green sweater, and both were in jeans. *Okay, guys. You get one chance.*

"He had it comin', guys." She shrugged, still pinning Mikado to the wall with her leg, her knee locked straight. "Do yourselves a favor. **Walk away.**"

"Get her!"

Ranko smirked, pulling back her leg and driving her knee into Mikado's back and ignoring the two men charging her down the length of the alley. "Gotta say, you've downgraded from hiding behind Azusa. These guys are way stupider. Stay here a second, wouldja, Mikado?" As she spoke, she reached out with her hand, squeezing

the skater's broken elbow and eliciting a loud scream. It still echoed through the alleyway as the girl in the black minidress turned to face her new challengers.

“Mei, get inside. Right now.”

Ranko cracked her knuckles as Mei slipped through the back door and into the warmth of the Phoenix kitchen. “Well, okay, boys. If that’s how you want it, who’s first?” She dropped into a taekwondo back stance, her right leg and arm extended forward and her left arm cocked behind her with an open, upturned palm. For the first time since the Full-Body Cat’s Tongue had been inflicted, she felt a sense of confidence in a fight. *Can’t get too cocky, though*, she reminded herself. *These guys may be nothin’, but one good hit and I’m pretty fucked, and it’s three against one.*

The man in the sweater reached her first, and Ranko leapt forward into a kick toward his face. The assailant, the taller of the two, caught her ankle in both hands, gripping it tight. “Gotcha!”

Ranko grinned. “Yep! Thanks for the boost!” She propelled herself forward on her standing right leg, spinning upward and using his grip on her leg as leverage. Twisting in the air, she whipped her right leg around. His grip on her ankle released as the toe of her black leather boot crashed into his cheek. He fell to the gravel in a heap, and Ranko’s momentum carried her toward the wall of the drug store next to the Phoenix. She landed in a crouch, glaring up at the man in the polo shirt who closed on her at a dead run.

Wait for it... wait for it... Ranko rose to a standing position, taking no fighting stance at all. When her opponent was less than two meters from her, she reached casually to her left, lowering a metal lever with a heavy *clunk*. The steel ladder for the drug store’s fire escape slid down on its track punctuated by a loud *squeak*, crashing loudly to the gravel. The redheaded martial artist took a step backward, letting the charging thug slam face-first into the ladder.

Mikado’s hanger-on had already started reaching for her when the narrow ladder dropped in front of him, and his right arm protruded between two of its rungs. Ranko grabbed his wrist, pulling him forward and slamming him into the ladder again at the chest. She ducked below his arm, still pinning him to the ladder with it, and delivered a series of three quick punches to his ribs. She only released his arm when she saw his sweated friend approaching in her peripheral vision.

“Man, you guys just don’t learn, do ya?” Ranko grabbed the side of the ladder, jumping and using the torque of her grip to add to the momentum of her horizontal motion. Again, her boot slammed into the young blond’s cheek, sending him sprawling to the ground close to his friend.

After a quick glance behind her to ensure that Mikado was not rejoining the fight, she squared off against his two accomplices. “Guys, it’s Christmas, so I’m gonna give you a present. Just this once.” She raised her right leg until her knee was at waist height, holding her right arm forward and her left over and behind her head in a crane kung fu stance.

“Run.”

The two men looked at each other, seeming to confer wordlessly about their plan of action. Nodding to each other, they turned and fled back toward the main street. **“Sorry, Mikado!”** the one in the sweater yelled as they turned the corner toward the harbor.

“That’s ri — **gyaaaaa!**” Having watched the pair until they reached the end of the alley to ensure they didn’t turn back toward the front door of the Phoenix, Ranko had taken her eyes off of Mikado too long. She cried out as her hypersensitive scalp screamed with agony as Mikado yanked her beribboned red ponytail backward with his left hand, bending her backward until she was looking up at him and holding her hair tight in his grip.

Mikado sneered, his face lowering closer to hers. “You’re good. I’ll give you that. But now, about that **kiss...**”

No. No. Nononononono... not again. Flashes of memories flooded her mind in an instant. A crowded arena. The stunned, pitied look on Akane’s face. Her father’s laughter when she went to him for advice. *Fight. Fight it,* she begged herself as the torrent of resurfaced trauma drowned out her thoughts.

“Get **off of me!**” Ranko threw her right fist out to her side, driving it up into his crotch.

Mikado released her hair, staggering backward with a pained grunt.

Ranko rose to a standing position, shaking her head. The avalanche of memories droned like alarm bells in her mind, and she wanted them gone.

I have to focus. It’s time to finish this.

She cocked her fists in front of herself, her elbows tucked close to her chest, dragging her left heel through the gravel and bending her knees, weaving slightly on her feet in a muay thai southpaw stance.

“You want your kiss, Mikado? **Come and get it.**”

I’ve learned a few new tricks since the last time we met, Ranko thought darkly. *A little parting gift from the Amazons.* She took a deep breath, exhaling it slowly as she replayed Koh Lon’s instructions from a year ago in her mind.

Don’t aim. Strike whatever’s in front of you.

Don’t defend. Your opponent will be too overwhelmed to attack.

Mikado rushed forward toward his prey.

Ranko did not move a muscle. Her eyes were almost glazed over, as if she were drunk.

Clear your mind. Thoughts make you slow.

Don't think. Just move.

She crouched slightly, and as he charged into her range, she drove upward into his ribs with a blisteringly fast punch, and another, and another, the blows crashing into him like an incessant hailstorm. Each strike rocked him on his feet, but they came so quickly that he could not regain his balance between them to defend himself.

Her mind was devoid of all conscious thought. Her hands moved autonomically, raining blow after blow upon her opponent. She did not know if each strike hit an arm, or a face, or a chest. She did not care. Every strike hit *something*, and the next invariably landed before Mikado could react. The memory of every tear Ranko had shed alone in the dark, every second of shame she had felt, and every mocking word she had endured because of Mikado Sanzenin became a spear that she fired into his torso with the force of a ballista and the speed of the deadly Chestnuts Roasting on an Open Fire technique.

Having cut herself off conscious thought - the key to unlocking the speed of the Chestnuts Roasting on an Open Fire technique - also denied her the will required to block the *unconscious* memories that resumed pouring into her brain unchecked. Her mind's eyes flashed with images of that night. Of the arena. Of a kiss. Of Ryoga's mocking. Of Akane's horror. Of crying. So, so much crying. She was no longer conscious of her surroundings. She did not feel the cold or the crunch of snow-dusted gravel under her feet. She did not hear the wind. She did not smell the full dumpster a few meters away. She did not see her fists move, and was barely aware of their meeting resistance when they struck home.

She thought she heard a sound, like a voice, but garbled, as if it were underwater. She did not process it. In the void of her mind, she was seconds from being trapped in Mikado Sanzenin's arms again. She heard another sound, distant, muffled, like someone shouting into a pillow. It blended into the cacophony of cackling and catcalls that echoed in her memory. His arms were closing in.

Ranko's fists continued launching forward with the speed of a machine gun, entirely on their own. Her right arm encountered a sudden, unexpected resistance, jarring her out of her memories. The distant voice rang out again, clearly enough to comprehend this time.

“RANKO! PLEASE! STOP!”

She turned her head, blinking, to find Hana standing behind her. The elder woman's feet were firmly planted on the ground, and she had both of her arms wrapped tight around Ranko's elbow, which was still raised above her head with her hand balled into a fist. A sound echoed through the alleyway, sounding eerily like a scream in Ranko's own voice, but Ranko didn't remember making one.

She turned her head slowly back in the direction of her other arm, her eyes an empty glaze. Her elbow was locked with her arm straight, her fist clenched around the collar of a silver polo shirt. Crumpled on his knees with his head hanging limply to the side, Mikado was barely conscious. His face was swollen and bruised everywhere. One of his eyes looked up at her, unblinking and glazed, and the other was swollen shut. Blood dripped from his nose and upper lip.

“He’s had **enough!** Let him go!” Hana pleaded, trying to pull the slender teen back toward the bar.

Blinking through the horrified expression on her face, Ranko unclenched her fingers, and Mikado slumped to the gravel with a thud and a pained groan.

The December chill followed Ranko through the steel door back into the Phoenix kitchen. Her eyes were completely dead and unfeeling. Mei, who had been huddled in the back corner of the kitchen near the walk-in freezer, quickly closed the distance between herself and her younger sister. When she did, she reached her arms around the redhead to hug her.

“Ranko, thank you. *Thank you.* You tried to warn me, and you were right about everything. I am so sorry I didn’t listen. I was cruel and stupid, and I said terrible, mean things, and...”

Ranko did not acknowledge her presence. She did not turn to make eye contact. Rather, she walked right through Mei’s arms without breaking stride, heading directly up the stairs. Mei’s worried eyes followed her.

“Would somebody **please** tell me *what the fu...*”

Hana cut her daughter off mid-sentence as she closed and locked the door leading to the alleyway behind herself. “**Not now, Yui!** Shut it down. **Right now!**”

Yui gestured in confusion. “How am I supposed...”

Again, Hana did not let her finish. “I don’t give a fuck if you have to pull the **fire alarm!** Clear it out, and don’t let Izumi out of your **sight** until it’s done!”

Mei slumped back into the corner next to the walk-in, her shivering not brought on by the cold. The adrenaline of the encounter finally giving way, she began to sob quietly. *I was so sure he was a good guy. Finally, I had a good guy. And then he goes and does this? And tries to... Worst of all, Ranko tried to warn me he was bad news, and all I did was abuse her for it,* she admonished herself in silence.

Hana crouched at Mei’s side and reached out for her daughter’s shoulder, but Mei shrank back from the matriarch’s touch. “Mei, baby, you’re safe now, sweetheart. It’s okay. *I’ve got you.*” Hana had not seen what Mikado had done, but it was clear enough to her what had happened.

The throbbing of the bass from the sound system up front faded, and Yui and Izumi shortly made their way to the back room. “They’re gone,” Yui said with a sigh and a shrug. “Everything’s locked up tighter than a drum. Now, what the hell **happened?!?**”

Hana looked up to her sadly. “Mei’s date tried to force himself on her.”

Izumi gasped. “**My gods!** Are you...”

The proprietress nodded. “She’s going to be okay. Ranko... **dealt with him.**”

Whether the battered perpetrator in the back alley would be *okay*, however, she did not know. In thirty years in the bar business, she had seen her share of fights, but nothing like *that*. It was as if the girl had been possessed. She wasn't sure that Ranko had even heard her screaming at her to stop. "Mei, I'm sorry to ask, but... the last time you saw Ranko fight, was she... *like that?*"

Mei shook her head, sniffing her tears back. "Not at all. She basically embarrassed them until they ran. But this time... Mama, that was..."

Izumi looked around for the subject of conversation, not finding her. "Where *is* Ranko, anyway?"

Hana shook her head, raising her palm in a *not now* gesture.

Yui stalked to the back door, double-checking to ensure it was locked, and then moved to turn off the oven which was beginning to smell of the pizza Hana had left burning within. She stroked her chin thoughtfully. "I don't get it. Ranko didn't take her eyes off of him all night. It's like she *knew* he was going to try something."

Hana nodded. "And she warned Mei to stay away from him."

In the corner, the blue-haired girl cringed, remembering some of the things she'd said to Ranko. *I was so vicious to her, and Ranko really was only trying to protect me. I just assumed Ranko was jealous. Wait, didn't Mikado say something about jealousy? Something about wanting **more**? Is that what brought out that level of... rage? It couldn't be because she was protecting me, because she was protecting me last time, too. This was something almost... primal. It wasn't just anger, it was... **hate**. Almost as if it was **her** that he...*

She gasped. There was only one explanation. Mei looked up in the direction of the closed door at the top of the stairs, sniffing and sighing in sadness and regret. "Mama, I don't think I was the *first* girl Mikado did this to."



Minutes later, there was a knock at Ranko's apartment door. Not receiving an answer, Hana gently turned the doorknob and swung the door open to find Ranko sitting on her bed, hugging her knees. Hana was somewhat surprised to see that she was not crying. Instead, Ranko was just staring forward catatonically. She didn't seem to even be aware that Hana had entered the room until the Phoenix's matriarch sat on the bed and rested her hand reassuringly on Ranko's ankle. The redhead tightened the ball she was curled into, pulling herself away from Hana's touch.

"Ranko, baby, are you alright? Are you hurt?" Hana received no reply. "Sweetheart, what happened out there? I've never seen you like that. I've never seen **anyone** like that. You scared us a little bit."

After a long pause came a mousey reply, her back still turned to Hana. *“Is Mei alright?”*

Hana nodded. “She will be, thanks to you.”

With a heavy sigh, Ranko turned her head back to face her adoptive mother, still hugging her knees tightly. **“Please** don’t thank me. I don’t deserve it.”

Hana reached up to Ranko’s temple, brushing her hair from her eyes – partly to help calm her, and partly to check her for injuries. In her current state, Hana wasn’t entirely sure Ranko would even notice if she were hurt. “Why wouldn’t I thank you? You saved Mei. **Again.**”

“You don’t understand,” Ranko retorted with a quiet whimper.

Hana nodded, stroking Ranko’s hair. The teen shied away from the old barkeep’s touch, but not enough to prevent it. “I know, honey, but I want to. Help me understand?”

The distraught redhead shook her head, undoing all the work Hana had done to corral her hair. “It’s **my problem**. I’ll deal with it. I always do. You should go check on Mei. She’s going to need somebody.”

Hana reached out for her shoulder, but Ranko shifted away on the bed again, trying to dismiss her. “Ranko...” She sighed quietly. *I’m pretty certain Mei was right, but better not to let on that I know unless Ranko decides to open up about it, she thought.* “Yui and Izzie are with Mei. She’s going to be okay. And I am with someone else who deserves love and support. You don’t have to carry everything alone. **Not anymore.** Please, let me help?”

Ranko looked away, her face and voice both tinged with shame. “I... I can’t. *I’m a disgrace.*”

“You most certainly are **not!** I know you lost your temper out there, but...”

Ranko interrupted her adoptive mother, and for the first time, there was at least a little inflection in her voice. “You don’t get it. I was raised in the martial arts my whole life. I’ve fought lots of times. Hundreds. **Thousands.** When I fight, I fight to end the fight as quickly as possible and make sure everyone I care about is safe. That’s what you’re supposed to do as a martial artist. You’re not supposed to lose your temper. You’re supposed to be in control of yourself.” She swallowed hard. “Tonight was different. I...” She could not finish the thought, her head lowered shamefully.

“It’s okay, honey. I’m here. Even if it’s just so you can get it off your chest.” Hana patted her young charge’s leg gently as she spoke.

The teen looked up, a tear running down her right cheek. She looked, for the first time that night, truly afraid. “Tonight, I wasn’t fighting to defend anybody. I wasn’t fighting to end the fight. I was fighting to end **him**. I could have **killed him!** If you hadn’t stopped me when you did, I don’t know that I could have stopped myself. I’m not even sure I **wanted** to stop myself. I wasn’t protecting anybody anymore. He

was beaten and we were safe. But I **just couldn't stop.**"

Hana patted her leg again, nodding quietly. The fact that Ranko was capable of such a destructive, blind rage scared her, too, but she wasn't entirely sure it hadn't been justified, especially if Mei's theory was correct. *I have to try and get the truth out of her somehow. The poor thing has carried this so long on her own that it already exploded out of her once. I'm pretty sure a second occurrence won't be good for anybody.* She leaned a bit closer to Ranko, speaking as gently and non-threateningly as possible. "It sounds like you might have been angry at him about more than just what he tried to do to Mei."

Ranko did not answer verbally, but the way she physically shrank from the words and hid her eyes confirmed Hana's worst fear, and Mei's.

Hana shook her head in dismay. *Is there nothing this poor kid hasn't gone through, at just eighteen?* She wrapped her arms around the quivering girl, holding her tight. "He... hurt you too, didn't he, baby?"

Ranko did not look up at her, but slowly nodded her head, sniffing.

"Do you want to talk about it?" Hana coaxed. A pigtail shaking side to side was the only reply she received. "Don't you think you should?"

The teen closed her eyes, willing the images flashing through her mind to stop. "What's the point? It's done now. Nobody cared then; why would anyone care now?"

Hana looked away for just a moment, wiping a tear of her own from her cheek. *If I could get my hands on Ranko's parents right now, I might be the one that has to be talked down from murder. The amount that this child has suffered without anything resembling a support system is just unforgivable.* "I can't speak to what happened then. But I'm here now, and I care, because I care about **you**. Because **you** deserve a chance to heal, too."

Ranko wiped her eyes, burying her face back in her kneecaps. "I know you are, Mama. And I appreciate it. But like I said, you wouldn't understand."

Hana sighed. "I **want** to understand, baby. I want to help. Please let me."

"I **can't**." The distraught teen hugged her knees tighter. "I don't want to see it in my head anymore. I can't face it."

Hana slid her arm under Ranko's head, lifting it and resting it gently on her lap. She softly stroked the teen's hair with her fingers, trying to calm her in any way she could. "What if we faced it **together?**"

Ranko sniffled quietly, giving a small, resolute nod. "Um..." She bit her bottom lip and took a deep breath. She remembered what Hana had said at the library that morning. **Her daughter.** *Maybe, she thought, almost hopefully. Just maybe, she might listen. Maybe she'll understand. Maybe she'll laugh. But if they all know me and Mikado had a history now, they'll never stop asking until I tell 'em the story. It might as well be now, when my heart is too fucking empty to hurt.*

“So,” Ranko began. *Crap. How am I gonna get past telling her me and Akane were doing it as a couple? She’ll know I used to be a dude...* “My last year in school, his school’s figure skating team and ours had a match in their school’s skating rink. Our... um, our team had an injury, and they needed a last-minute replacement, and they asked me. I have no idea why; I don’t even know how to skate. I could barely stand up without falling, let alone do any tricks or anything. We were out on the ice, and he came right at me. I tried to get away, but I wasn’t fast enough, and I slipped.

“I almost hit my head on the ice, but he caught me. At first I thought he was being nice, but then he wouldn’t let me go. His hands were... everywhere, and I couldn’t get any leverage to get away because he picked me off the ground. I opened my mouth to scream at him, to tell him to put me down, and when I did, he lifted me up and... he *kissed me*.” Ranko gazed down at her hands, despondently picking at her fingernails to avoid having to make eye contact with Hana.

“Like, crammed his tongue in my mouth and everything. I should have bit the damn thing off. I couldn’t get away, I couldn’t move, I couldn’t even say no. And the crowd... There were thousands of them in the arena watching the match. And they just cheered, and laughed, and shouted dirty things at me. It was **fun** for them! I was just the sacrifice that got fed to the lion for entertainment.”

Hana hugged her ward tightly around her shoulders. “*Oh, baby...*”

Ranko shook her head. “Of course, our school newspaper covered the match, so everyone at my school knew what happened too. I heard about it for months. Guys would come up and ask when it was their turn. I’d hear them in the hall talking about what a *slut* I must be to make out with some upperclassman from another school in front of all those people.” In fact, most of them had said it to her face, because they thought they were being crass around a sympathetic fellow guy, and not the very subject of their taunts. “I’d never kissed anybody before, and now every time I think about it, I just hear them laughing from everywhere at once, like my skull is gonna explode with it.

“I had nobody to talk to about it. I didn’t know what to do. I even made the mistake of going to my father for advice, and he just **laughed** at me, too. Said if I were a strong enough martial artist, I could have stopped him, and that since I wasn’t good enough to beat him in a fair fight, I should just let him distract himself by... *touching me*... until he let his guard down.” A tear fell from her eye, racing down her cheek and soaking into Hana’s blue jeans. “***I wasn’t even good enough at being violated for him.***”

“I ended up having another fight with Mikado, and the second time, I won. Barely. I thought that when I beat him, I’d get over it. Like, I’d feel safe again. It would stop hurting. But it just never happened. All I could think about is that anytime I lost a fight, somebody could just... ***do whatever they wanted to me***, and I wouldn’t be able to stop it.”

Hana sat with her back to the headboard, enveloping her young charge in her arms as both women wavered on the precipice of tears. “Oh, Ranko, honey. There are no words. ***I’m so sorry, sweetheart.*** But it wasn’t your fault. I don’t care what that asshole father of yours said. Try to focus on the fact that when you needed to, you

got stronger, and **you stopped him.**”

Ranko shook her head. “If I had stopped him, or even been brave enough to tell Mei about what he did, he couldn’t have tried to hurt her tonight.”

Hana sighed, nodding. “I understand why you would be reluctant to talk about what happened. I’m sure Mei will, too. But you did what you could, and when he did try to hurt her, you were there to defend her.”

“Maybe at first,” Ranko retorted. “But by the end, I wasn’t even thinking about what he did to Mei. All I wanted was to avenge **myself**. I watched him all night tonight, and I kept telling myself I was making sure he didn’t try to hurt her. And I mean, don’t get me wrong, I **did** want to make sure she didn’t get hurt, but... I think a part of me was *hoping* he would try something just to give me an excuse to hurt him back. I just kept remembering his hands on me, the smell of his breath, the sound of everyone laughing, and all I could feel was anger, and hate, and wanting him to suffer for everything he put me through. It’s no better than he deserves, but it’s my responsibility to be better than that.”

The redhead cringed, looking away from her mother as the image of Mikado’s battered face appeared again in her mind’s eye. “I was seconds away from beating him to death, and I’m not sure I was even conscious anymore. I completely lost control, and that shames me and scares me more than anything he ever did to me. That’s not who I want to be. I hate him more than ever for bringing that out of me, and I hate myself even more for losing control and letting him. And then on top of it all, the people I respect most in the world look me in the face and tell me they’re **proud** of me for it, and it makes me wanna be **sick**.”

Hana swallowed hard. *I expected a hell of a story, but this is... a lot.* She paused for a moment to process it all before responding. “I don’t know much about being a martial artist. But you say that it’s about protecting the people you love, right? Well, I say that the list of people you love and care about should start with yourself.” She squeezed Ranko’s shoulder, not sure if she was trying to give the girl some strength, or find some for herself. Probably both. “When you’re in a fight, someone is trying to hurt you, and your job is to fight until they can’t hurt you anymore, yeah?”

Ranko nodded, her cheek still resting in Hana’s lap.

“Since he did what he did to you, have you had a single day that you didn’t think about it? That it didn’t make you feel vulnerable and afraid and angry?” Hana stroked her youngest daughter’s hair as she spoke.

The redhead shook her head no.

“Do you think he can hurt you anymore now? That he’d ever dare to try again?” Hana wiped a tear from Ranko’s cheek with a whisper-soft touch of the backs of her fingers.

Again, Ranko shook her head.

“Well, I don’t know what place an old barkeep has to lecture a martial artist about

honor, but I would argue that he never stopped hurting you until tonight, when you finally stopped him. He threw the first punch the day he did what he did, and you've been in that fight ever since.

"You're right to think about using your skills responsibly. They give you a power that you can wield against other people. The fact that you make the effort to consider how it impacts them - even when they have hurt you as much as he did - is what makes you better and more honorable than them. Maybe you did go too far tonight, and if I'm the only thing that stopped you, then I'm glad I did. Not because I think he didn't deserve what he almost got, but because you **don't** deserve to spend the rest of your life carrying the weight of that around. He has already haunted you long enough.

"I'm not proud of you just because you beat on that scumbag. I'm proud of you because you **stopped**. You defeated him when you stopped him from hurting you and Mei, and then you defeated him **again** when you made the decision not to let him drive you to do something you'd regret forever. Even if you did have help making that decision, there's no shame in that. All of us need help sometimes. All of us have moments where we're hurt and angry and broken and not thinking straight, and we need the strength of the people who care about us to lean on until we find our way again. That's not weakness, it's **humanity**. And the fact that you don't already know that breaks my heart. You've been facing everything on your own because the people who were supposed to be there to help you carry the load **failed you**. That's not your shortcoming, but theirs. **You deserve support from the people who love you**, and if I can only teach you one thing, I hope it's that."

She stroked Ranko's arm softly. "I don't know about the people in your past, but I can promise you that as long as the other girls and I are around, you will never have to face anything alone again, ever. I may be shit in a fistfight, but I will always have your back anyway. Come douchebag figure skaters or **fucking dragons**, or just a bad dream, I don't care. That's what it means to be a real family. Fuck bloodlines and ancestry and clan names and all that shit. It's being there for each other when the chips are down, **no matter what**."

Ranko's eyes welling, she sat up and leaned into Hana's chest, wrapping her arms around the elder woman's back and squeezing as if she feared she'd fall off the world if she let go. She breathed deeply of the scent of Hana's leather jacket - an aroma she'd come to associate with safety and peace. "I... I..." She knew what was in her mind, but it had been so long since she'd said the words sincerely to anyone that she couldn't find a way to will them past her lips.

Hana squeezed back, kissing the top of Ranko's head through her wavy flame-red hair. "I know, kiddo. **I love you too**."

Ranko stiffened as she heard the knock on her apartment door. *Relax, Ranko, she admonished herself. Nobody's gonna get me in here. I'm safe. I dealt with that jerk last night.* She exhaled heavily, calming herself. "Come in." She heard the door open behind her, but did not turn from her position sitting on the bed to address the newcomer.

The songstress was wearing the green velvet dress with the white faux fur trim that Izumi had picked for her, accessorized with white lace stockings that came up to the middle of her calves. Her matching white lace gloves had tiny satin bows at the back of the wrists, and despite Izumi's encouragement to take it off, her silver dragon bracelet remained coiled around her left arm. Her hair hung in a single braided ponytail, but Izumi had weaved a white ribbon into it, giving it the red-and-white swirled appearance of a candy cane. Her fingernails were painted in alternating red and green glitter polish, and she wore a full face of makeup - in part to hide the puffiness under her eyes that would have betrayed how much crying she had done the night before. A Santa hat in a matching green velvet sat on the bed beside her.

Ranko grumbled under her breath as she struggled to clasp a choker around her neck behind her back. "I'm almost done, **honest**. I'll be down in just a few minutes."

"So," came a voice from the doorway. "I understand it's tradition that the **leading lady** gets flowers in her dressing room before the big show."

Ranko swiveled on the bed, her eyes brightening immediately at the familiar voice. "**Akane!** You came!" Her once-betrothed stood in her doorway in a white turtleneck sweater and a long, heavy red skirt, holding a lavender-tinted glass vase containing a dozen white roses. "How did you even know we were doing this tonight?!" *Gods, it's so good to see her,* Ranko thought, beaming. *It's been a hell of a few days, and I could really use the pick-me-up.*

Akane set the vase on Ranko's little dinette table before reaching into the pocket of her corduroy skirt and pulling out a Polaroid photograph. She held it up so Ranko could see. "The Nabiki News Network."

Ranko giggled a little at Akane's statement. "Well, tell her thank you for me. I'm so glad you're here!" She stood to join Akane at the table, reaching out for a hug.

Akane released her once-partner after a moment and looked her over from head to toe. "*You look...*"

The redhead sighed, shrugging her shoulders. "Ridiculous, I know. Don't blame me, Izzi picked it out."

Akane shook her head, grinning. "I was going to say *cute*. **Really** cute, actually."

The songstress blushed deeply, looking down at her stockinged feet and biting her lip. As strange as it was to enjoy being called *cute*, it also made her feel guilty for all the times she'd said the opposite to Akane. She'd never realized how much it must have hurt her. "I, *umm...* I'm glad you approve," she said with a playful smicker.

Akane motioned to the bed. "Do you need some help with your necklace?" She reached out, taking Ranko's right hand without waiting for affirmation and giving it a reassuring squeeze as she started to pull the redhead toward the bed. She looked up in surprise when Ranko let out a sharp yelp. Akane turned back to face her, worry in her eyes. "Ranko? What's the matter?!"

Ranko exhaled through her gritted teeth. "**Nothing**, I'm okay."

Akane looked the slender girl over skeptically. "You know, I've known you for long enough to know when you're lying." She reached up Ranko's arm, hooking her finger around the wrist of the lace glove on her hand and pulling it off. She gasped at what she saw. All four of Ranko's knuckles were swollen, and her fingers were bruised black and purple. "**My gods**, what happened?! Were you in a fight?"

The redhead snatched her glove back up off the bed. "I don't want to talk about it." *I can't go down this rabbit hole now, not right before I get on stage. I don't need all that shit in my head.*

"But... are you **okay?**" Akane's hand instinctively rose to her lips.

Ranko nodded, a light tinkling sound coming from the small silver jingle bells that dangled from her earlobes. "I'm fine. You should see the other guy." Ranko legitimately did not know if the *other guy* was even still alive. She wasn't entirely sure if she even hoped so.

Akane put on a smile, taking Ranko's lead that it wasn't the best time to talk about whatever happened to her hand. *I'll ask her about it again after the show.* "Well, at least you can't sneak up on anybody." She reached out with one finger, poking one of Ranko's earrings and listening to it ring out. She giggled as the earring fell to the floor.

Ranko joined her in her laughter as she bent down to the floor for the little bell. "Izzi had to get me clip-ons. They don't stay on too good. I'm worried they're gonna fall off when I dance, but I'm not supposed to change the studs they pierced my ears with for a few more weeks."

Akane bit her tongue as the bell dangling from Ranko's other ear rang. *The sound reminds me of the cat Kasumi had when we were little. Something tells me I shouldn't talk about him in present company, though...* She blushed at the thought of Ranko in her current form entering the Cat Fist state. Ever since Ranko's father tried to teach her the deadly martial arts technique by throwing her into a pit of starving cats, the poor girl's ailurophobia was so severe that even the mention of cats could trigger a trauma response: Ranko involuntarily acting exactly like a cat until her nerves could be soothed. It was disconcerting, but Akane couldn't help but think it was cute, too - especially the fact that Ranko's "cat mode" always seemed to gravitate toward Akane for safety and comfort.

“Well, come here, you.” She scooped up the necklace, a white lace choker with a little silver heart dangling from it, from the bed. “Turn around, let me see?” Ranko complied, and she felt Akane drape her arms over her shoulders. There was a brief tension on the choker as Akane pulled it back to manipulate the clasp. “There, all done!”

Ranko spun around in place, finding herself face-to-face with Akane, the shorter girl’s arms still wrapped around her neck. She blushed furiously, flashing a shying smile. “I, ah, um... *thanks, Akane.*”

“Ahh... well, I... I know you’re going to do great tonight.” Akane blushed as well, pulling her arms back to her sides quickly.

The performer smiled, fidgeting with her skirt. *It still feels weird, wearing a dress in front of her.* “I hope so. We’ve got a lot riding on this tonight. I’ll tell Izzi to save you a seat up front.”

Akane waved her off. “Yui already took care of it.” Her cheeks flushed again, and she shrank a bit with a smile. “She said it was officially the *VIP table.*”

“Well, that’s good. Hopefully, it’s busy enough that you need the reservation. We really need a big night tonight.” Her eyes bore a nervousness Akane wasn’t used to seeing on Ranma’s face, but, Akane reminded herself, it was no longer Ranma to whom she was speaking.

The taller girl grinned. *She really doesn’t know?* “Um, Ran-chan...” Akane was still struggling to get used to Ranko’s new name sometimes, especially when she was lost in her memories of the time before Ranko had left her family’s home, and Ukyo’s old nickname for her seemed a reasonable compromise. “You... haven’t looked out your window, have you?”

Checking herself over in the mirror one last time, Ranko shook her head, another little jingle punctuating her response. “Been getting ready for the last hour and a half. Man, sometimes I miss throwing on a shirt and some gi pants and being done.”

Akane waved her over to the apartment’s lone window, between the kitchenette and Ranko’s white pine nightstand. “Come here a sec.” She pulled the lavender curtain to the side, exposing the apartment to the orange glow of the setting sun, and the narrow alley running between the bar and the discount store next door.

The songstress padded over in her lace stockings to join Akane, and her eyes widened as she took in the scene. There was a line three and four people wide all the way around the building, despite the light snowfall. Many were dressed for a classy date, not a typical night out at a Western-themed dive bar. The line was moving, indicating her sisters had begun admitting the audience for Ranko’s first-ever ticketed *concert.*

Ranko gasped. “All those *people...*”

Akane smiled in proud reassurance as she finished Ranko’s sentence. “... are here to see **you**, superstar. So, are you about ready to give them a show?”

Ranko shook her head, her earrings jingling again. “As I’m gonna be.” She bent down and reached under the bed, picking up a red shoebox and tucking it under her arm as Akane opened the apartment door and began descending the stairs.

Ranko walked up to the slatted blue saloon door but dared not exit yet, peeking over it at the activity in the bar room proper. The tables in the center of the room had all been removed, and a crowd nearly double the bar’s usual capacity were standing shoulder-to-shoulder waiting for the show to begin. In a rare sight, Hana herself was running drinks to customers, pushing frantically through the crowd. *It looks so hectic out there. I wish I could help, but Mama said no doing anything other than performing tonight*, Ranko thought. Yui, meanwhile, was cranking out drinks and seeming to have a blast doing it, in part because Ayako had come in to help tend the bar as well. The two of them worked alongside each other with a fluidity that could only come from years of partnership, their synergy having not been lost in the few months since the eldest of the Phoenix sisters had moved to Yokohama with her husband.

Hana pushed past Ranko, grabbing another few pizzas for hungry revelers. “Hey, kiddo! Lookin’ good!” she called as she darted by in her trademark black leather jacket. She’d accented it with a red headband with felt reindeer antlers bobbing back and forth atop it. *There is absolutely zero chance that wasn’t Izzi’s idea*, Ranko thought with a smirk.

Mei came out of the kitchen to meet Ranko at the door, a sheepish look on her face. She was wearing a purple jewel tone blouse and a black knee-length skirt. Ranko turned to face her sister and Akane. “Akane, would you mind giving me and Mei a minute?”

Akane shook her head. “Of course not. I’ll see you out there, okay?” She gave Ranko a quick hug. *“For luck.”*

The redhead squeezed her back tightly. *“I’m already lucky, just ‘cause you’re here,”* Ranko whispered as the two embraced.

Smiling as Ranko released her, Akane headed out into the bar room to find her seat at the newly-designated VIP table, and Ranko followed Mei back into the kitchen.

“Ranko, I...” Mei looked down at her sneakers sheepishly. “I don’t even know what to say to you after yesterday. I was so...”

The redhead nodded, resting her hand on the shorter girl’s shoulder to cut her off. “I know. Mei, it’s **okay**.”

Mei frowned guiltily. “No, it’s not. I owe you so much more than an apology and a **thank you**, for everything. And besides, I didn’t even work with you to put together a setlist for tonight. So you’ll be winging it in front of all these people, and it’s my fault.”

Ranko placed the shoebox on the counter, offering Mei a reassuring smile. “First of all, you don’t owe me anything. You wanted to believe in somebody even when people were telling you not to, just like Mama did for all of us. If you ask me, that’s **brave**, even if it didn’t work out this time. I should have told you the truth about my

history with Mikado. I just... I guess I couldn't bear to admit what he did to me, either. I was ashamed, and I didn't want you and the others to pity me. But that was **my fault**, not yours." She slid the shoebox across the metal prep counter. "And the show is handled."

Mei blinked, opening the shoebox. Inside were a series of cassette tapes in plastic cases, lined up in a row. Each was queued up to exactly the place it needed to be started from, and on top of the tapes were several hand-written pages of notebook paper on which Ranko had scripted - in multiple drafts, judging by the number of scratch-outs - the entire show, all the way down to lighting changes.

"Oh! Wait! Last minute change!" Ranko grabbed a pen from the counter, drawing an arrow into the third song slot and moving two tapes in the box. "Trust me."

The blue-haired girl nodded her head. "I've got to tell you, I'm **impressed!** You did a great job with this!"

Ranko smiled proudly. "I hope so. They're the ones who really need to think so." She motioned over her shoulder to the blue slatted door leading to the front of the house.

Mei grinned, reaching down and gently taking her sister's hand. "What say we go **find out?**"

Akane took her seat at the one table left on the floor, off in the side wing where the pool table and arcade machine used to be. A few of the other tables were stacked behind her, and the rest had been removed up to the rooftop for the evening in order to free more space in the main bar for the overflowing crowd to stand. She looked around the room at the hundreds of assembled revelers waiting for Ranko to take the stage, and smiled warmly. *Look at what you've done, Ranko. You've completely reinvented yourself in such a short time, and now, all these people love y...* Akane shuddered, cutting her thought off before it had a chance to fully form.

Mei walked out onto the stage, and the audience erupted in a raucous cheer. "Hey everybody!" She waved enthusiastically to the crowd. "Welcome to a **very** special night here at the Phoenix! **Merry Christmas!** Is everybody having a good time tonight?"

The beyond-capacity crowd roared in response.

"That's what we like to hear! But it's not what **you're** here to hear, is it?" Mei tapped her temple twice with the microphone, letting the **thump thump** from just below her left pigtail echo through the speakers. "What could it be, what could it be... **Oh!** You're here to see my little sister **sing**, aren'tcha?"

Akane thought her eardrums would burst as the crowd responded with a thundering chorus of whoops and cheers.

"Well, then I guess we better get her out here, huh?" Mei turned to her left, looking just past Akane's table to the side door leading into the kitchen. "Hey, Ran-chan! **You ready?**"

Ranko's excited voice rang through the speakers. "**You know it! Let's do this thing!**"

The three hundred and sixty-four revelers packing the Phoenix sounded like three thousand as Ranko exited the kitchen, waving and beaming at the assembled bargoers. She lightly dragged her lace-gloved fingers gently across the cheering Akane's back as she passed the newly-designated VIP table and ascended the three stairs to the stage, her rhinestone-studded dynamic microphone in hand.

"So..." Ranko leveled her hand over her eyes, surveying the crowd. "Have you all been good this year?" The young songstress in the kelly green velvet dress laughed over the deafening crowd. "Well, good news, everybody! You've still got a couple days before Christmas to screw it up! So let's put some names on that **naughty list, huh?!**"

Akane smiled up at her former partner, watching her soak in the call and response from the audience. *She's gotten so good at working a crowd. She looks like she's*

having the time of her life. Whatever happened to her hand yesterday, she seems okay now, she thought with a sigh of relief. There was a joy and an energy in the beautiful redhead's eyes that Akane had only seen once before – the first time she saw Ranko on stage almost three weeks prior.

The songstress looked off to the side, where Mei was setting up the sound board, pointing at her and making the shape of a heart with her hands.

Akane felt a pang of jealousy, but it quickly faded. *I don't know these girls that well, but I doubt Ranko's doing anything... like that... with them. She considers them her sisters, and they're all way older than her, too. Besides, it's not like me and Ranko are a couple anymore, right?* Akane swallowed hard. *Right?* The raven-haired girl mopped her brow with the sleeve of her sweater. *Is it getting hot in here? Must be the crowd. And the lights.*

The speakers pounded to life with a high-energy remix of *Jingle Bell Rock*, and Ranko began to sing. The crowd joined in through the choruses, and Ranko stalked the stage back and forth, making eye contact with as many people as she could, rallying the crowd to the celebration. Her brow dripped with sweat as the hot red and green incandescent lights blazed on her overly sensitive skin, but she seemed not to care.

I can't believe that this is the same person who I had to threaten with a mallet in order to get a backup singer at our Christmas party last year, Akane mused as she bounced playfully in her chair and clapped along with the rhythm pounding through the twelve overhead speakers. *But, then again, a lot about her has changed since last Christmas.*

"What a bright time! It's the right time to rock! The! Night! A-way!" Ranko giggled as she thrashed her hips back and forth with each syllable, the fur trim at the hem of her Santa dress tickling her legs through the holes in the white lace stockings she wore.

"Jingle bell time is a swell time..." Ranko extended her microphone out to the crowd, swishing her skirt with her right hand as the crowd continued the chorus.

"To go gliding in a one-horse sleigh!"

"You got it!" Ranko bopped across the stage, dropping a wink and a smile in the direction of the one person seated in the whole bar.

"Giddy up, jingle horse! Pick up your feet! Jingle around the clock! Mix and a-mingle in the jinglin' feet!"

Ranko shrugged her shoulders. *So weird, rhyming 'feet' with itself. I could've sworn it said 'beat,' but Izzi looked up the lyrics.* She held the microphone out to stage right, and the crowd packing the side of the bar furthest from Yui and Ayako's domain at the counter roared out in response.

"That's the jingle bell!"

The songstress rocked her hips to the left, swiveling in place at the waist and pointed the microphone out at the side of the room closer to the kitchen entrance. Everyone who had not chimed in for the first repetition did so, Akane included.

“That’s the jingle bell!”

The redhead pulled the microphone back to her own lips in her right hand, finishing the song at a full belt. ***“That’s the jingle bell RO-O-O-O-CK!”*** She held the final note for almost three seconds, even after the background music had ended.

“Alright!” Ranko clapped her hands after a few moments’ pause for applause. “I’ve never had **four hundred** backup singers before! Not bad, everybody!”

The crowd whooped loudly in response.

“So, tell me something, Phoenix!” Ranko rubbed her chin thoughtfully. “Are you all ready to see **Santa?**!”

Yet another roar came forth from the assembled revelers.

“I don’t think he can hear you! We’d better call him! You ready, Phoenix?! Here we go! **SAN-TA! SAN-TA!**”

By the second repetition, the audience had joined in the chant, and on the fourth repetition, the tape Ranko had queued up with Mei blared out the speakers just as she had scripted it. Ranko’s voice flowed from the chant directly into the verse. ***“SAN-TA! SANTA Claus is coming to town!”*** There was an almost sultry sass in her voice and choreography that did not escape Akane’s notice. ***“He sees you when you’re sleeping. He knows when you’re awake. He knows if you’ve been bad or good...”***

She looked back over her shoulder at the crowd off to her left, putting a mischievous twinge into her voice. ***“So, be bad, for goodness’ sake!”*** She winked and kicked one of her heels back behind herself, almost high enough to get it caught in her skirt, and the crowd erupted.



Ranko surveyed the gathered partygoers as her second song drew to a close. Everywhere she looked, people were clapping, cheering, and smiling. She’d even seen a few video camcorders here and there, and tried to wave to them whenever she could. ***It’s working. I still can’t believe this is all... for me. Sure, people have always been impressed by my martial arts stuff, but folks pretty rarely applaud you for a fight. The last time somebody clapped at a fight I was in was... She swallowed the thought back as soon as it began. Not tonight, Mikado, she thought to herself. You can’t take this from me tonight. In fact, you’ll never hurt me again. I made sure of it. I won.***

“RAN-KO! RAN-KO! RAN-KO! RAN-KO!”

The redhead blinked, shaking her head and willing her consciousness back into the moment. *Focus, Ranko. People are waiting. No time for that shit tonight.* She smiled, waving to the crowd. Much though she knew she needed to start the next song, she couldn't help taking a few moments to bask in the moment. *They see me as who I am. Not who I was or how I got here.* She looked down at the dainty lace glove on her right hand, her blackened knuckles still aching within as she gripped the microphone. *They don't know where I came from. They don't know what a mess I was. And still am.* She raised her eyes to the anxious crowd, and an impish smile was all it took to rile them back to buzzing. *But they know this is where I belong.*

She caught Yui out of the corner of her eye. The blonde was frantically shaking two aluminum containers, one over each shoulder. *She must be exhausted already,* Ranko thought. “Hey, real quick - is everybody enjoying the drinks tonight?” Another assenting cheer rose from the patrons as Ranko extended her arm toward the main bar counter. “Then let's all give some love to Yui and Ayako back there at the bar, huh?”

Both women raised the bottles in their hands in response to the cheering crowd.

As the audience whooped in appreciation, Ranko swiveled at the waist, motioning with her open hand to the service bar. “You guys in the front! How's Izumi treating you tonight?” The roar continued in acknowledgement of the Phoenix' third bartender; with the tables removed, most table service had been suspended, converting the service bar into a third station for walk-up cocktail sales.

“Do I sound okay up here?” Ranko smiled as the capacity-plus crowd howled in approval. “If so, make sure to thank my sister Mei! She's running the audio and lights for our little party tonight!”

Mei looked up from Ranko's notes, waving from the little makeshift booth next to the VIP table as the crowd cheered again.

Ranko beamed at the sight of a tall woman in a leather jacket peeking over the blue slatted door leading into the kitchen. “And let's not forget Hana – the heart and soul of the Phoenix. We love ya, Mama!”

Hana waved from the saloon doors, yelling back to her youngest daughter loudly enough to be heard over the thundering roar of humanity packing her bar. “Yeah, yeah! Now **sing something**, will ya?”

The crowd laughed in unison.

“I will, Mama!” Ranko giggled, shaking her head playfully. “But first, I've got one more person I want to mention.”

Akane blinked, looking around. *I could have sworn there were only the five of them. Do these friggin' women grow on trees?*

Ranko lowered herself down and sat on the edge of the stage, dangling her feet off

and crossing her ankles as she spoke into her microphone. “So, there’s somebody here tonight that’s... **really special** to me. She’s been there for me through some stuff I couldn’t even begin to describe, and...”

She turned her head to Akane, the sole occupant of the sole table left in the room. Her gaze left no doubt about to whom she was speaking. She smiled warmly – **almost** lovingly. “I just wanted to tell her *thank you*. For **everything**.”

Akane blushed, hiding her face a little bit as the crowd cheered.

Ranko laughed into the microphone, scanning the assembled throng with her eyes. “You know, it was actually Akane here that got me into singing?” A few more whoops rose up from the crowd. “Yeah! Would you believe I used to hate it? And now, I couldn’t imagine my life without it. She used to make me get up in front of parties and sing with her, and it always embarrassed the crap out of me.”

Ranko reached next to herself and picked up the second microphone from where it lay on the edge of the stage, spinning it around in her left hand so that the handle side was offered outward to the lone table in the room. She leaned down into her own microphone with a devilishly devious smirk. “What would you all say to **helping me return the favor?**”

Akane’s eyes widened in shock as the crowd began chanting her name. She shook her head, all the blood in her body rushing to her face at once. Otherwise, she did not budge.

“**A-KA-NE! A-KA-NE!**” the crowd continued.

Ranko grinned, the microphone still extended toward her once-betrothed. “Akane, you **know** how stubborn I am. I’ll wait here all night until you get your butt up here with me. You wouldn’t do that to all our new friends out there, would ya? C’mon!”

After a few more seconds of the chanting, Akane rolled her eyes and stood, and the crowd roared. She made her way up the three stairs to the stage platform as Ranko rose to her feet, handing over the microphone.

Akane shook her head with a grin, having not yet turned the microphone on. “*I’m gonna **get you** for this, you know.*”

Ranko grinned back roguishly, switching off her microphone just for a moment. “Is that a promise?” She flicked her thumb to turn the mic back on, dropping a sharp nod to Mei.

The redhead turned her body away from Akane, hanging her head cutely to the side with a playful challenge in Akane’s direction as the music began. “*I really can’t stay...*”

Akane shook her head in amusement. *That little minx!* They had sung the duet together at the last Christmas Ranko had spent at the Tendo residence, but even though Ranko was in her feminine form, Akane had gotten a kick out of giving her the masculine side of the duet. By singing first, Ranko had flipped the script on her.

Still, the musical gauntlet had been thrown and it was too late to back out, so Akane responded. *“But, baby, it’s cold outside...”*

Ranko took a few steps away from her, looking back over her shoulder and coyly playing with her braided hair. She put on a stage face of shy nervousness, but the blush on her cheeks was real. *“I gotta go away...”*

Akane smiled and shook her head incredulously. She strongly doubted the flirtatious act was intended for her, but she couldn’t deny that the audience was eating it up. *“Baby, it’s cold outside...”*

Ranko took another few steps away, biting her lip and putting on an innocent face for the audience. *“This evening has been... so very nice...”*

Akane stepped closer toward her, singing her part as well. *“I’ll hold your hands... they’re just like ice!”*

As the song continued, Ranko continually made a show of trying to get away, with Akane picking up on the act and giving chase. As the first verse ended, Akane closed the gap enough to really get a look in Ranko’s eyes, and there was an unexpected sincerity in her expression.

“I ought to say, no, no, no sir,” Ranko crooned softly. *“At least, I’m gonna say that I tried...”*



As the second verse came to a close, Ranko took a step back toward Akane. *“There’s bound to be talk tomorrow...”* and she suspected that there might be. She wasn’t entirely sure she cared. *“At least, there will be plenty implied.”*

Ranko blinked, looking up at the black-haired woman who had just taken her hand. *“I... really can’t stay...”* Her cheeks were warm enough to melt the light snowfall outside.

Akane stepped closer, her eyes sparkling above a bright smile. The two teens harmonized together, gazing deeply into each other’s eyes. *“Ah, but it’s **cold outside.**”*

The crowd roared in approval as the song ended, but the two young women on the stage barely seemed to notice.

“Silent night, holy night!”

Ranko beamed to the capacity crowd as she finished Tatsuro Yamashita’s *Christmas Eve* with its final English line. She appreciated having at least the occasional Japanese-language song in her lineup, though the options for Christmas songs in her native tongue were quite slim. *At least I understand what the heck I’m talking about with this one.* It had been a popular song that holiday season, owing to its heavy use in television commercials.

The effervescent redhead had been on stage for over two hours straight, and was close to wrapping up her second performance of the evening. The first show ran from 6:30 to 9:00, with a half-hour break to clear the bar and sell tickets for the second run through the twenty-one song setlist beginning at 9:30. Still, as tired as she was, Ranko was all waves and smiles as she bounced across her new stage platform, soaking in the cheers and affection of the second crowd of three-hundred-plus patrons that had packed the Phoenix - and its coffers - that evening.

“Okay, everybody,” Ranko said into her microphone. “I’ve got time for *one more song*, and then I’ve gotta say good night and let everybody go home! Of course, this place *is* home, for all of us here at the Phoenix, and that’s why it means so much to us all that you came out to celebrate with us tonight! After all, it wouldn’t be Christmas without *you!*”

As she finished speaking, a backing track of jingle bells and a tambourine began playing through the bar’s sound system. Ranko swayed on the stage, letting her fur-trimmed green dress dance playfully around her knees over the white lace petticoat Izumi had insisted she wear. She clapped her lace-gloved hands around her rhinestone-studded microphone, doing so gently both to prevent an audible *thump* on the microphone, and to protect her injured fingers.

A few seconds into the music, the track began a feminine vocal repeating just the singular word, “*Christmas*”, every few beats, and Ranko began singing between the repetitions.

“The snow’s coming down! I’m watching it fall! Lots of people around! Baby, please, come home!”

Come on, Ranko. Closing number. Gotta have a big finish. One more big push. You can do it. The young songstress threw herself fully into the performance, adding even more vocal runs and pushing her voice into as high of a register as she dared despite her weariness. She barely had energy to dance after five hours onstage, but she tried to make up for it with her voice and her thousand-watt smile.

Akane, sensing that her once-partner was struggling, stood and clapped along with the music. *Just a few more minutes, and you can rest. Feed off of us, Ranko.*

“They’re singing ‘deck the halls’, but it’s nothin’ like Christmas at all, ‘cause I remember when you were here...” Ranko flashed a smile at Akane, popping her hip to the side. *“And all the fun that we had last year...”*

Yui, Ayako, and Izumi darted frantically behind the twin bar counters, filling the final few drink orders before the concert ended. Ayako had to grab one patron by the wrist, encouraging him to blow out the blue flame atop his *Dragonfire* cocktail before wading back into the crowd for safety reasons.

“Baby, please, come home!”

Hana slipped back through the blue swinging door to her office, a pile of credit card slips and register printouts in her hand.

“Baby, please! Please! Please!”

Mei flipped a few switches, triggering a series of white, red and green strobe lights that flickered all around her younger sister.

“Baby, ple-e-e-eaaaaaase, come ho-o-o-ome!”

The stage lights blinked out, and in the dark, Ranko leaned forward. To the roaring audience, it looked as if she was bowing, but Akane knew better. The poor girl was slumped over from sheer exhaustion.

“RAN-KO! RAN-KO! RAN-KO!”

As the blue-haired woman behind the audio equipment raised the house lights, Ranko put on one final stage smile, waving to the crowd as she walked across the edge of the bar’s new stage platform. She wanted to make eye contact with each and every person who had given up their night and paid money for no purpose other than to see her sing. “Thanks so much for coming out, everybody! Merry Christmas, we love you, and we’ll see you right back here next time, at! The!

Phooooooooooooooooooooenix!

The young songstress thrust her right fist in the air as the audience roared one final time, even as the folks standing closest to the front door began making their way to the exit. She didn’t remember a single time in her life that she had ever felt so tired - or so happy.



Ranko leaned back in her chair, exhaling deeply. She was well and truly exhausted. It was one thing to alternate between singing and her waitress duties, but five hours of performance was draining and fulfilling in truly overwhelming measure. Her four adopted sisters, along with Akane and Izumi’s fiancé Kaito, sat around the eight-top round table with her, sharing stories and highlights of the evening.

“Man,” Yui said, chuckling as she sipped from a brown bottle of beer. “Forget tickets, we could’ve paid rent for a month if I’d charged a hundred yen every time somebody asked for Ranko’s **phone number!**”

The redhead flushed, hiding her face in her lace-gloved hands. “Joke’s on them! I don’t even **have** a phone!” She didn’t notice Akane cringe off to her left.

The barroom, which had been packed to bursting with people just two hours before, was empty save for the seven of them. Everyone had pitched in to put the place back to rights after the party, even Kaito and Akane. The tables and chairs that had been stacked in the corner of the bar had been restored to their proper places, and even the eight large cherry tables that had been hauled up to the rooftop had been carried down the stairs and placed back where they belonged. The floor was freshly swept and the bar counters wiped down. A mountain of glassware was stacked on the service bar close to the dishwasher, waiting for its droning to cease so another load could be run through it. It would probably take three or four loads of both the glassware dishwasher in the front and the commercial washer in the kitchen to get through all of them, but there was always the morning to finish it.

Mei looked around at her exhausted companions. *Maybe it’ll be the **afternoon** when we finish it instead*, she thought with an intimidated sigh, cradling her head in her hands.

The conversations around the table ceased when the saloon doors opened and Hana emerged, a smile on her face. She wore a white tee shirt and black jeans, having left her trademark black leather jacket on the ratty old couch in her office. The old barkeep said nothing, heaving herself up onto one of the brown vinyl barstools with a grunt of effort and swiveling it to face her family.

After a few moments, Yui broke the tense silence. “**Well**, Mama?! How’d we do?!”

Hana held up a solar-powered digital calculator with a figure displayed on its little cerulean LCD screen. “We were **hoping** we’d bring in half of what we needed tonight. If my math is right, we’re only about ninety thousand yen from having it **all!** You girls were **absolutely incredible** tonight, all of you! I am **so proud** of you all! And, Aya, Kaito, Akane, thank you so much for all your help tonight! We couldn’t have done it without you.”

Ayako grinned, shrugging her shoulders gently. As she did, her puffy green jacket fell off the back of her chair onto the floor. “It’s what family does, Mama. All you ever had to do was ask.”

Rubbing her chin, Yui turned back to the proprietress. “If we keep the themed Christmas drinks up for the rest of the week at a premium price, we might be able to make up that last few thousand, too!”

Izumi looked to her partner, who nodded with a smile, and Izumi stood up. “Actually... Mama?” She reached into the pocket of her long red skirt, pulling out a wad of bills. “Kaito and I would like to finish it off for you.”

Hana blinked in shock. “Izzi, honey, no. You don’t have to do that! You’ve got the

wedding, and..."

The middle of the Phoenix' five daughters waved Hana off with her empty left hand. "I think we can live with a couple fewer floral arrangements if it means we can take the weight of this off your shoulders. It's the least we can do for you, Ma."

Kaito beamed, standing and putting his arm behind his future wife's back. "Call it a dowry, then, if it'll make you feel better."

"Might wanna rethink that, Kaito," Yui said with a chuckle, draining the rest of her beer into her mouth. "Izzi can get **awfully** fuckin' expensive."

"Don't I know it," Kaito replied with a loud belly laugh.

Izumi scowled in her partner's direction, giving him a playful punch in the arm. "**Hey!** Don't say that! It might be **true**, but... you don't have to **admit it!**"

A tear ran down Hana's cheek as she dismounted her stool and stepped forward, putting one of her arms around Izumi and the other around her future husband. "Thank you both, truly."

Izumi squeezed her back tightly, growling playfully into the hug. "No, Mama. Thank **you**. For everything. None of us would even be here without you."

The embrace ended after a few long moments, and Izumi counted out nine worn brown ten-thousand-yen notes, handing them to her mother. Hana slipped them into her pocket as she walked back to the bar counter, updating the total on her calculator. "Well, it looks like I've got bills to pay tomorrow!"

The table erupted in cheers and clapping.

Ayako grinned and raised her pint glass. "The Phoenix **rises again!**"

The rest of the bar's occupants whooped and raised their glasses and bottles as well, clinking them together over the table. Yui had to jog over to the bar counter and reach over it for a new bottle of beer in order to join in, but she was more than happy to oblige. She tapped it against Mei's pilsner glass before prying it open with a tool dangling from her belt and taking a long draught.

Ranko stood, picking up her green velvet Santa hat from the table and her black heeled boots from the floor. She stretched her arms upward with a loudly-vocalized yawn. Her speaking voice was a bit hoarse and scratchy, almost an octave lower than usual after so much time spent singing. "I don't know about you all, but I'm freakin' **beat**. I think it's bedtime for me."

She turned behind her, her cheeks afire as she grinned at the high schooler in the white sweater and red corduroy skirt. "Hey, Akane? Are you staying tonight?"

The black-haired girl nodded, her face flushed as well. "If you don't mind. The buses aren't running until morning, and I told Dad I'd be out all night." *I wonder how his dinner with the mayor went. Shame I missed it, but I had somewhere more*

important to be, she thought with a soft smile.

Ranko beamed, her face warming further as Mei, Ayako and Yui made loud whistles and catcalls. “Oh, don’t be **gross**, you girls! Of **course** I don’t mind, Akane. C’mon, you.”

As Akane stood, Izumi raised her martini glass again. “To the **star of the Phoenix!**” A series of cheers and whoops came from the table, and the sound of glass clinking could be heard as Ranko turned with a warm, if exhausted, smile.

“Good night, everybody.” Ranko started to make for the saloon door, but she was stopped by a strong pair of hands on her shoulders. She looked up into Hana’s eyes - *far* up, as the old barkeep had about a thirty-centimeter height advantage over her. “Hey, Mama.”

Her eyes widened as Hana pulled her into the tightest hug Ranko had ever felt in her life. “*Thank you, Ranko,*” Hana whispered as she squeezed her youngest daughter against her chest.

Ranko hugged the tall woman’s waist in return. “After everything you’ve done for me, you honestly think you have to thank me for singing a few songs? Don’t be ridiculous.” She released the proprietress after a moment, glancing back at Akane with a smile before returning her eyes to the family’s matriarch. “But, if you really want to do something nice for me? Let me go to bed before I fall over.”

“You got it, little star,” Hana said through a chuckle as she released the teenager. “Good night, Ranko.”

“G’night everybody!” Ranko called again as she gave a half-effort wave, following Akane through the blue slatted door at a trudge and hanging a right to ascend the narrow staircase.

When both of them were behind the closed front door of her little apartment, Ranko dropped her shoes at the doorstep, plopping heavily onto the edge her bed. She had to catch her dress from poofing up indecently over her white lace petticoat. “Hopefully getting **out** of this getup doesn’t take as long as getting **into** it did.”

Akane giggled. “Usually not. I’ll help you if you want.”

Ranko blushed deeply. “**Well**, Akane... I...”

It was Akane’s turn to be flustered. “I, *ah*... I didn’t mean it like **that**, ya big **dummy!**”

Ranko gave a quiet, almost disappointed “*hm*.” and turned to her mirror with a shrug, smiling up into the reflection of Akane’s eyes from behind her.

“Hey, Ran... Ranko? Can I... ask you something?” Akane fidgeted with her hands as she took a step closer to the young singer.

Ranko started to reach behind herself to unzip her dress, but quickly stopped when

she realized Akane hadn't continued, and that there was a timidity in her voice. She patted the bed next to her with a smile. "Of course." Something about hearing Akane call her by her new name always seemed to lift her spirits, as if it were a way of the old life she'd once known finally acquiescing to be replaced by the new.

Akane walked closer with a temerity usually reserved for the dentist, her hands clasped in front of her waist. She slowly sat down a half-meter or so from Ranko, smoothing the lavender duvet cover with her hands nervously. "Did you plan to bring me on stage tonight from the beginning?"

Shaking her head with a tinkling sound, having not yet taken down her braided hair or removed her clip-on jingle bell earrings in order to give Akane her undivided attention, Ranko shrugged her shoulders gently. "I added it just before I went on stage. I hope it's okay. I was really just trying to play around with you. The crowd freaking **loved you**. I'm sorry if it upset you."

Akane grinned impishly and looked down at her hands again, her crimson cheeks warm enough to melt butter. "Oh, no. It didn't upset me. **Surprised** me, for sure." She swallowed hard. She had one more question to ask, and she wasn't sure what answer she hoped for. "And what about, you know, what you said before the song? About **me?**"

The redhead nodded emphatically. "I meant every word. I should have said those things to you a long time ago, Akane. I've had a lot of time to think about the way I treated you when I lived with you. I was a jerk and I didn't know how mean some of the things I said really were at the time. You deserved better. You **deserve** better. I'm... I'm really sorry, Akane. For all of it."

Akane bobbed her head softly, scooting a little closer to the smaller girl. "Thank you, but you don't need to apologize." She swallowed hard. "Ranma **was a jerk** sometimes, it's true." Her hand slid across the duvet cover until it rested on Ranko's. She was gentle, careful not to put too much pressure on Ranko's injured knuckles. "But... Ranma's... **not here right now**, is he?"

Blushing a deeper shade of red than Akane's knee-length skirt, Ranko allowed the smallest of smiles to crack through her mien of shame and exhaustion. "... **I suppose not.**" She looked up from their joined hands to meet Akane's gaze. "Akane, **what are y...**"

Akane cut her off by leaning over their clasped hands, planting a quick, tentative kiss on her cheek.

Ranko blinked her eyes open, reacclimating to her surroundings after a blissful few hours of sleep. *Man, my dreams were freakin' crazy last night. I could have sworn that Akane...* She rubbed the sleep from her eyes, and when they opened again, they fell on her bedroll, still rolled up tightly on the floor. *Wait. Why would that be there, unless...*

She started to move her arm tentatively, but found she couldn't, as it was being pinned down by the left arm of the person holding her from behind. Her eyes jolted open, and she rolled over on her back to look behind her.

Holy shit. It was real.

Her mind raced through her memories of the evening. *After the show, Akane... **kissed me.** She just helped me out of my outfit, we blushed and stammered at each other for twenty minutes, and we went to bed. I was gonna sleep on the floor, but she invited me to share the bed. We were both girls, so it's okay, right? Nothing else happened. It's not like we had sex or anything... hell, how would two girls even...* Ranko shook her head, careful not to let her ponytail fly back and strike the sleeping Akane's face. *Yui would know. She swallowed hard enough for her gulp to be audible. Not like I need to know! Not thinking about that! Nope! She'd never want to...*

She looked up at the bathroom door, sighing contemplatively as she snuggled back under the lavender duvet cover that enveloped both girls. *I really gotta pee, but I don't wanna get up. This feels really nice. **Really** nice. Doesn't have to be anything gross about it. It's always cold up here at night, and she's so warm. And it just feels good to have somebody... hold me like this. It feels... safe. Plus, if I get up, it'll wake her up.*

Ranko played with the white ribbon that still adorned her braided pigtail, sighing happily. After a moment, she scooted backward, ever so gently, until her yellow nightshirt touched the green one she'd loaned Akane. She felt her muscles relax at the touch of the larger girl against her back, and the sleeping woman unconsciously squeezed a bit with the arm draped over Ranko's waist. An involuntary purr escaped the redhead's lips as she was held. Ranko lay there quiet and still for about twenty more minutes before Akane finally stirred.

Akane sat up with a stretch, the pale green nightshirt she had borrowed from Ranko sliding up her arms and barely exposing her white satin panties. "Mmm. Good morning."

Ranko rolled over, smiling up at her companion. "Good morning to you, too." There was a contented glow about her as she lay on her back in her yellow nightshirt, her pigtail laying across her chest. "Want some breakfast?"

Akane shook her head, smiling down at the redhead through a yawn. "Not right now. Thanks, though." *I don't want her to get up yet. It feels really good, just being close like this.*

The redhead sat up in bed next to Akane, resting her back against the headboard and pulling the duvet back up around her waist. "Akane... *about last night...*"

Akane blushed, hiding her face behind her splayed fingers and her bed-matted bangs. "I don't know what came over me. I'm really sorry."

Resting her hand on Akane's, Ranko turned her head and gazed sincerely into a pair of smiling brown eyes. "I guess, what I wanted to say is, *I'm not.*"

"Y...you're *not?*" Akane gasped audibly. "But..."

The redhead shook her head, grateful to no longer sound like a wind chime in a hurricane when she did so owing to her clip-on jingle bell earrings having been removed. "It was... kind of *nice*, actually. Just unexpected."

Akane swallowed hard, stammering as she fidgeted nervously with her fingers in her lap. "Well, I, *ahh*, I didn't mean to... I... *I should have...*"

Her voice quieted when Ranko laid her index finger across her lips. "Shh. *Come here.*" Ranko removed her finger from Akane's lips, closing her eyes and softly kissing her in the spot her finger had just vacated. *Holy crap, holy crap, she's not hitting me or nothin'... this is really happening!*

Akane was smiling through bright red cheeks when Ranko pulled back out of the kiss. "Well, *that* was nice."

Ranko nodded. "For me, too." She bit her lip, looking down at her hands with a coy simper. "So... what does this mean? Like, for us?"

"I don't know," Akane said with a shrug, brushing her bangs out of her eyes with her fingers. "What do you *want* it to mean?"

Sighing heavily, Ranko slumped her shoulders in disappointment. "I'm not sure it matters. We both know it can't happen. Not with me like... *this.*"

Akane rested her hand on the redhead's back, rubbing it reassuringly through her thin cotton night shirt. "I'm willing to try if you are, *Ranko.*"

Ranko blinked up at her in shock. "Y...you are?!"

A nod and a smile came in reply. "Mm-hmm! What about you?"

Diving forward, Ranko wrapped her arms around the black-haired girl, squeezing her tightly enough to almost void the air from her lungs.

Akane hugged back, laughing and kicking her feet excitedly. "I take it that's a yes?"

Ranko let go, sitting up and looking Akane in the face. Taking both of Akane's hands in hers in the space between their laps, Ranko nodded with an ear-to-ear smile.

"Yes."

The elder girl smiled brightly, but her expression faded a few moments later as a harsh reality set in. "So, what do we do now? We can't just go back to how things were before, obviously. We're both **girls** now. Our parents don't even know you're **alive**."

Ranko laid her head in Akane's lap, resting her right ear on Akane's thigh with a heavy sigh. "For now, let's keep it between us. Just until we figure out what it all means and what to do. But right now, this minute, I don't **care** what we call it. Worrying about that bullshit with labels and pressure and crap is what got us in trouble last time, back when I lived at your place. For now, all I need to know is, whatever it is, I just **don't want it to end**."

Akane took a moment to consider her words, and she was right. The couple had been deemed to be engaged by their parents less than two hours after they met, and the pressure it added to their relationship had caused nothing but problems. *I've often wondered what would've happened between us if Dad and Mr. Sotome had just butted out and let us figure it out for ourselves, Akane mused. Maybe this is our chance. Although... it's certainly a little different now.* "You're right. I care about you, you care about me, and for now, the rest can take care of itself."

No idea how that's actually gonna happen, but... Ranko curled her knees tighter into her chest as Akane idly stroked her hair. *I've been thinking about it for weeks, ever since she came that first time. Ever since Nabiki found me, really. Kinda bullshit if you ask me; the minute I accept that I'm stuck as a girl and there's no way I could ever be with her, here she comes, and...* She wrapped her arms around Akane's knee. *If there was a way, I'd have thought of it by now.*

"Now, are you going to get off of me so I can go to the bathroom?" Akane poked the redhead gently on her shoulder. "You're cute and all, but..."

Ranko scooted closer to her, nuzzling her cheek on Akane's thigh as she pulled the down duvet cover up to her shoulders. "Nope. **It's too cold**."

Akane chuckled. "Listen here, you little **brat**, I'm gonna..." Her voice devolved into uncontrolled giggling as Ranko reached up and began tickling her ribs at lightning speed. **"Hey! Stop that, you!"** Akane squirmed, but could not escape Ranko's lightning-quick hands until she was ultimately shown mercy a few moments later.

The roughhousing caused Ranko's still-damaged hand to ache, but the young songstress didn't care much. *At least being distracted with the concert and everything, she never made me tell her about Mikado. Last thing I wanna do is look her in the face and think about that asshole **again**,* Ranko thought. *I beat him, Akane. I made sure he can't ever hurt me or the people I love ever again. Not Mei, and not...* Her breath caught in her throat as she realized exactly who else she had included in the *people I love* category.

Finally released from Ranko's grasp, Akane stood and walked into the little

bathroom. She left the door open for the moment, gazing into the wall-mounted mirror behind the countertop. Her hair was a chaotic mess and the minimal makeup she had worn to the concert was long removed, washed away before the pair went to bed the night before. “Yeesh! I’m a total freakin’ wreck.”

Ranko shrugged. “Well, *I* think you’re **cute**.”

Akane blushed, popping her head back out of the bathroom. Her face was painted with stunned shock. *She’s never said that to me! In fact, she usually says the opposite, quite often.* “Y... you **do**?”

Ranko nodded emphatically, beaming at the elder girl. “Yep. Bed head and all.”

Akane tried again to tame her hair with her fingers, smirking. “You know, you’re pretty cute yourself, **missy**.” She closed the bathroom door as she finished speaking, flashing a wink in Ranko’s direction just before the doorknob latched shut.

It was Ranko’s turn to blush. In all the times she’d inhabited her now-seemingly-permanent feminine form, she couldn’t remember a time where she had expressly **wanted** to be cute. There had been plenty of times where her appearance or affected feminine mannerisms had proven advantageous as a means to an end, but never had she wanted *cuteness* for its own sake. At that moment, nothing in the world sounded better, as long as the compliment came from Akane. *If I’m gonna subject Akane to all of the stress and bullshit that could come with being with another girl, I damn sure wanna be worth it,* she decided. The resolution brought up another question that darkened her heart, and her eyes drooped to the bed. “Is... is that what you **want** from me?”

Akane opened the bathroom door, giving Ranko a quizzical look and speaking over the sound of the toilet refilling. “What do you mean?”

Aw, man, Ranko thought. *You’re actually gonna make me say it out loud, Akane?!* “I... how to say this?” She bounced her leg on the bed nervously. “I mean... We’re both girls. Nothing’s gonna change that now.”

“Yeah, I think we’ve established that,” Akane said with a slow nod. She retrieved her red knee-length skirt and white sweater from Ranko’s open closet, taking a seat back on the edge of the bed. “I thought we were past it.”

Ranko frowned, furrowing her brow as she turned her eyes away from Akane to let her dress in privacy. “That’s not what I mean.” She swallowed hard, picking at a bit of green fingernail polish that had strayed onto her cuticle. “Like, how do you **want** me to be?”

Having pulled off her borrowed nightshirt, Akane fastened her powder blue bra behind her back and swiveled on the bed. “Ran-chan, you’re not making sense. I don’t understand what you’re asking me.” She rested a hand on Ranko’s shoulder tentatively, paying no mind to her state of undress.

Ranko looked down and off toward the dinette table rather than turning and risking being accused of peeping. There was a shame in her voice and on her face that

Akane had not noticed at any point since Ranko's last night as a guest in her father's home. "Like... Do you expect me to act like a guy again if we're together? I mean, as far as I know, you don't, ya know, **like girls**. Not like **that**, anyway."

Akane cringed. *That had to have been hard for her to ask, considering everything.* "Ranko, listen to me. Look at me. It's okay."

The redhead lifted her eyes from her hands and met Akane's, careful not to let her gaze stray southward at the lithe woman sitting on her bed in nothing but her underwear.

"I don't like girls," Akane began. "I don't like most **guys**, either. But I like **you**. I expect you to be **you**. You're... **we're**... still learning who that is right now, and that's okay. I'm not exactly a Disney princess all the time either, as this **jerk** of a boy I used to know was always saying."

She smirked, hoping the moment of levity eased the tension for Ranko. "You are a girl now, and I have no more right to make you act like a boy than you would have to make me be one." Akane leaned over the bed, playing with the ribbon in Ranko's cherry-red hair. "If you want to be cute, then you be cute. If you want to be a tomboy, then do that. But whatever you do, **do it for you**. Not for me, or Izumi, or anybody but you. If you do that, you'll be amazing no matter how you turn out, and I'll be happy to be along for the ride." As she spoke, she slipped her corduroy skirt up her legs, lifting her backside up on the mattress to shimmy it up to her waist.

Ranko smiled, her cheeks aflame as she took a moment to consider Akane's words. *Do I actually want to be... cute? To be... pretty? I mean, if I'm gonna be on stage... but I mean, there's punky girls that do like all black and baggy jeans and stuff and still do music. So I don't have to go all bubblegum princess if I want to sing. But...*

"Thanks, Akane," she said, a tentative halt in her voice. "I think... I think I like where I am right now. I mean, it's a lot. The clothes and the makeup and all of that is just so much more... **complicated**... for girls. I'm not sure I'm gonna do it right. But... even before the Cat's Tongue, I spent the last few years feeling like I couldn't fully be a guy, and I couldn't really be a girl either. So now, I kind of just want to settle into one and do it right, ya know? Feel **normal**?"

Akane slipped her sweater over her head and stood, walking toward Ranko's closet. She started idly flipping through outfits, looking back over her shoulder at the redhead with a mischievous grin. "Then, I suppose we'd better find my **totally normal girlfriend** something really **pretty** to wear, huh?"

Ranko sighed, rubbing her eyes as she waited for the ceramic tea kettle to whistle on the two-burner glass cooktop in her apartment. *Come on. Go faster. I still gotta let you cool some before I can put you in my face, and I need caffeine, like, urgently,* she thought.

Remembering something Kasumi used to say about watched kettles never boiling, she wandered back to the narrow bathroom at the far corner of the little studio apartment above the Phoenix, setting to work brushing her hair. *Gods, it looks like freakin' ferrets nested in it. I really gotta start washing the hair spray out before I go to bed.* She'd opted against a shower before bed, owing both to it being almost three in the morning by the time she and her sisters had finished cleaning up the bar, and not wanting to go to bed with wet hair.

Grateful though she was to have the apartment and not still be living on the street, the old brick building's central heating system was optimized for the bar area downstairs, and her room still got quite chilly at night in late December. It didn't help that she owned nearly no warm clothes, as nearly everything she possessed, and everything she'd been loaned by Izumi, had been intended for the stage. *I just need to convince Izzi that boys find sweat pants and a soft, fuzzy sweater sexy, and I'm golden,* she mused hopefully.

I mean, I used to be a boy, and I did. When it was Akane wearin' it, at least.

Her cheeks flushed hot, and she hid them in her hands even though no one was in the apartment with her to see them.

Ranko wore the warmest outfit she *did* own, a mauve sweater dress that came nearly to the middle of her calves. She had tried to wear her black gi pants under it to add an extra layer, but they kept bunching uncomfortably under the dress. Beyond that, the two fabrics rubbing against each other kept producing static electricity that periodically zapped her as she touched random surfaces. *Better to shiver than spark,* she presumed.

Having declared styling her still-tacky hair to be a lost cause and coaxed it back into a simple ponytail, she emerged from the bathroom just as her tea kettle began to whistle. *Freakin' finally!* She took it off the burner carefully, pouring its contents into a teapot at the maximum extension of her arm. *Hot, hot hot hot! Not today, boy mode and agony. Not today.*

While her tea steeped, Ranko opened her half-size refrigerator, sticking her head in

it to look around. *Eggs. Eggs. Where are you, eggs? Crap, did I use them all?*

“Ranko?!” A loud rapping came at the front door of the little shoebox of a studio apartment. “You up?”

The redhead jumped, startled by the sudden sound, and struck the back of her head on the roof of the refrigerator’s cold compartment with a hollow *bonk*.

“Owww... Come in...” Ranko was still rubbing the back of her skull and blushing when the door swung inward and Ayako entered in a white cable-knit turtleneck sweater and a pair of black jeans.

“Good morning, little sister!” Ayako grinned, tossing a brown paper bag onto the white pine dinette table and setting a clear plastic cup of brown liquid next to it. “Breakfast is served!”

Ranko beamed, opening the bag and finding her sense of smell had not betrayed her. She extracted a large chocolate muffin, still warm from the oven, from the bag and shoved a straw down into the cup of iced coffee. “Aya, have I told you lately that you’re my **favorite** sister?” she asked with her mouth still full of the first bite.

The taller woman chuckled, shaking her head. “No, but clearly, it’s because my pastry deliveries have been slow in coming.” She motioned to her younger sister’s attire. “That dress is so freaking cute on you.”

Ranko shrugged, swallowing. “Thanks. It’s just warmer than most’a what I have. It gets a little chilly up here sometimes.”

Ayako cringed a little, nodding as she watched her sister shiver through her breakfast. “Yeah, you’re right. I should have remembered we emptied the place out when Mei moved in with Yui. There used to be extra blankets in the closet, but Mei took them with her. I’m sorry. We should have thought of it. We’ll get you some new ones, promise, and maybe a space heater too, if you need. But, hurry up and eat. We got a busy day planned.”

“News to me,” Ranko said. “We handled most of the cleanup last night, so... what am I missing? And what are you even **doing** here?”

With a dismissive wave of her hand, Ayako slipped into the dinette chair opposite her sister. “Baby, you just single-handedly saved the bar. I think it’s probably earned you a day off. And I’m taking you shopping. After all, it’s almost Christmas. Only a few days left!”

Ranko frowned, her shoulders slumping over her half-eaten muffin. “Yeah, about

that. I... don't really have too much money. As it is, I've been trying to get a few things I need here and there when I get paid, but there's not a lot of extra."

Again, Ayako waved her sister's protest away with the back of her hand. "I kinda thought you'd say something like that, but don't worry about it. I'm the big sister. It's my job to take care of you for your first Christmas with us. I'll spot ya enough to get some gifts for everybody. It'll be our little secret."

The redhead's eyes bulged and her cheeks reddened around the straw in her mouth. "Aya, I can't ask you to do that. I'm..."

"Hush," Ayako said with a soft smile. "You weren't asking. I was *insisting*. C'mon. I've been there. I know it's not a great feeling when you're just getting started and you're broke around Christmas time. I wanna help, honey. Besides, it's a good excuse to just hang out with you. I feel bad; I've been so preoccupied with Kage and his family and everything that I haven't had much time to spend getting to know my new baby sister. I'm sorry about that."

Ayako grinned broadly at the sight of Ranko's further blushing. "I feel like I'm closer to Yui, Izzi and Mei because I've spent more time with them, and I'm sure you feel that way, too, but I don't want that for us. You're my family, too, Ran-chan. I love you just as much as our other sisters."

Ranko shrugged, but she couldn't help cracking a gentle smile at the idea. "It's okay. I know you're busy and everything. I didn't, like, take offense or anything. I mean, you're a newlywed, and I'm... well, *whatever I am*, I guess."

Ayako stood, walking to the kitchenette counter as Ranko popped the last bite of her muffin into her mouth. She returned a moment later, walking up behind the redhead and plopping her green velvet hat onto her head. Its white faux fur trim tickled Ranko's skin between her eyes. "Come on, Santa. Sleigh's a-waitin'."



*"Here, we know that Christmas will be green and bright! The sun will shine by day, and all the stars at night! Mele kalikimaka is the **wise way** to say Merry Christmas to you!"*

Ranko giggled as she sang along with the car radio and waved her arms in front of herself, letting her wrists flow like waves over the dashboard of Ayako's black Honda Civic. She only occasionally flubbed the lyrics, despite the fact that she was largely just mimicking the sounds of the unfamiliar English vocabulary. Her backside

wiggled in the tan vinyl seat, doing the best impression of a hula dance that her seat belt would allow.

Ayako pulled the car into one of the vacant parking spaces in front of the Shibuya shopping mall where, just barely a month ago, Izumi had given Ranko her first real outing as a woman. The place was a bustle of activity, with people frantically darting to and fro with arms overflowing with bags and wrapped packages. “That’s a fun song,” Ayako said as she turned the key to silence the engine and the car radio with it. “You seemed to be enjoying it.”

The redhead nodded, blushing. “Sorry, was I getting too...”

With a wave of her hand and a shake of her head, Ayako reached for her car door. “Not at all. You’re a **performer**. You’re supposed to be a little over the top.”

Ranko’s blush took on a whole new level, and she looked down at her hands. “I... I guess I **am**, huh?” She grinned, popping the door handle inward and stepping out of the vehicle. “Aya, what’s a *kalikimaka*? It’s in an English song, but it sounds Japanese. So, I feel like I should recognize it, but I don’t.”

Ayako laughed as she pushed her car door closed behind her. “It’s Hawaiian, honey. That’s what the whole song is about. *Mele Kalikimaka* is the Hawaiian phrase that means *Merry Christmas*.”

“But...” Ranko huddled closer to her sister to step out of the way of a frantic-looking woman who struggled to carry her armloads of bags and parcels back toward the parking lot. “Hawai’i is in America. They speak English, right?”

“They do,” the elder woman said, pulling the heavy glass door of the colossal shopping plaza open and holding it for her sister, “but Hawai’i has only been a part of America for about ninety years. Before that, it was its own kingdom, with its own native language.”

“*Huh!*” Ranko shrugged. “Learn something new every day, I guess.” She sighed contentedly as her body adjusted to the warmth of the artificial heating inside the crowded shopping venue. “It’s so crazy in here. Look at all these freakin’ **people!**”

Ayako peered over a kiosk displaying a map of the mall, nodding absently as she planned their first step. “Well, *yeah*, blockhead! It’s three days before Christmas!”

“Like...” Ranko motioned to a long line of people - mostly parents with small children - snaking around what appeared to be a small cottage erected in the middle of the mall’s common area. The little house couldn’t have been bigger than Hana’s office. It had a bright green roof and red walls, and was brightly decorated in tinsel, colored

lights in fake snow, with a fence of red-and-white striped candy canes surrounding the whole of it. “What the hell is going on over **there**? Whatever they’re selling, it’s going like freakin’ hotcakes.”

The raven-haired woman turned to follow Ranko’s gesture, and her jaw fell open. “You... don’t know what that is? **Really?!**”

Shrugging, Ranko playfully swatted the white cotton ball at the tip of her hat out of her face. “No clue. Looks like... a candy store, maybe?” She looked up to her much taller sister, blinking as Ayako took her hand and began pulling her toward the little indoor cottage. “Umm, Aya... what are we...”

“You’ll see.” Ayako pulled her sister into the queue behind a woman shepherding her two children. The little girl couldn’t have been more than six years old, and she was wearing a bright white dress cinched with a glittery silver belt. The other child, this one a boy probably a year or two younger than his sister, was dressed in black dress shirt with a pair of red suspenders holding up his black pants. “So. Do you know what you’re thinking about getting for the girls? We’ve got a minute here, so, let’s *plan of attack* this thing.”

Ranko frowned, looking down at her shoes as they stepped forward in the line. “I... I don’t know. I mean, I don’t know how much money I’m supposed to work with, and...” She sighed heavily. “I feel like, I’ve only been here a couple’a weeks, and everybody’s been so focused on getting to know **me**, that I haven’t really gotten a chance to get to know **them** very much. I guess... that makes me kind of a shitty *sister*, huh?” She made a pair of air quotes with her fingers at the use of the word *sister*.

“In fairness, you’ve been a sister for barely a month, Ran-chan. Of *course* you’re still figuring it out.” Ayako nudged the diminutive teen’s shoulder with her hand. “C’mon. Don’t be so hard on yourself, honey. First of all, some of us aren’t so good at talking about ourselves to begin with - Mama and Yui especially. And... for most of us - with the exception of maybe Mei because she was the newest of us before you - understand that when someone new joins us, there’s a period where we sort of *have* to give her our undivided focus. Like, me and Yui and Iz and Mei, we’re all... ya know, *mostly okay* now. I mean, we’re works in progress, and we probably always will be, but like...”

Ranko nodded softly. “I get it. I was a hot mess. You ain’t gotta remind me.”

Ayako shook her head, advancing in the line again. “It’s not that. I mean, yeah, you were, but no worse than any of us were when we found the Phoenix, in our own ways. But, like, that’s been our focus. Getting you stabilized and on your feet, so you can start figuring out how to **thrive**. You’re just lucky there’s **five** of us now to

team up on you. You're getting the full-on intensive care routine."

The redhead nodded, giving Ayako the smallest of smiles. "It definitely is *intense*, I'll give ya that. But... it's felt... *nice*, having a family. Like, one that gives a damn, anyhow. I just don't know how I'm supposed to repay everything you and the girls have been doing for me."

"We **absolutely** give a damn," Aya began. "And, the reality is, nobody expects you to repay anything. I mean, hell, you've only been with us a month, and you've **already** saved our asses, so it's not like this isn't a two-way street here already. You're taking care of us, too. That's what family does. I wash your back, you wash mine, and we don't keep score. There is no, *I did this for you, so now you have to do this for me, and you're beholden to me until you do*. It's more like, *my sister needs help and I can help, so I will help*."

"Maybe tomorrow, I'll be the one who needs help, and you or one of the other girls can be there for me. We do those things for each other not because we **owe** each other, but just because we love each other and want to help each other when we can. Right now, you need a lot of help, so I can understand why you might feel like you're taking more than you're giving. But, Ranko, I promise you, more days like this week will come where all of us are sitting around a table going, *thank the gods for Ranko! She really came through for us*."

Ranko smiled brightly at the thought of being helpful. "I **hope** so! I really wanna be worth everything you're all putting into me." She stepped forward in line again, standing on her tiptoes to try and see what it was she was queued for, but her barely one-and-a-half meter frame was insufficient to crane over the line that doubled over itself at least three times.

Ayako shook her head, wagging a finger in Ranko's face. "You **stop** that now, girl. You hear me?! I'm trying to tell you, it's not transactional. There's no sense of, like, *we have to get such-and-such out of Ranko or she was a waste of effort*. I don't know how many times we have to tell you, Ranko, but you..."

"I know, I know. *I am wanted, I have worth, and I have people who care about me*," Ranko said through a chuckle in an almost singsong tone, stepping forward in line again. "It's just..."

Aya sighed. "Nuh-uh. No *justs*, and no *buts*. **You** are the reason you're worth it. Nothing you can do for us, no amount of asses in the seats at the Phoenix listening to you sing, is ever going to be more important to this family than your **being a part of it**. You are all the reward we need, sweetheart, just exactly the way you are. It scares the living shit out of me - all of us, really - how hard it's been to convince you of that."

Ranko shrugged sadly, a distant frown crossing her lips. Her voice took on a hollow tone. "Yeah, well, **you** try getting sold for a bowl of rice and a couple pickles sometime - I think there might have been a fish - and it'll make you think awfully hard about what people think **you're** worth, too." She grunted loudly as she was grabbed and pulled into Ayako's grasp and tight against her sister's chest.

"You listen to me, Miss Tendo," Ayako said as she squeezed her sister tight. "**I love you**. There is no price on Earth that would make that not so, and Mama or any one of the other girls would say the same. You are our **family**. You are part of us, and we wouldn't be whole without you." She leaned down, kissing the smaller girl on the forehead just below the white fuzzy trim of her green velvet hat. "We love you so much. You don't even know. Not yet, anyway. But you **will**."

The redhead froze in Ayako's arms. "You... you really *do*?" She'd heard the phrase a few times from the denizens of the Phoenix, but she still struggled to understand at times what it meant in the context of being a live-in waitress who also got spoiled with the occasional gift, and the far less-occasional hug.

Ayako nodded, giving her sister one final squeeze before letting her go and turning the corner to double back in the line. "Of course I do. We **all** do. You're something special, kiddo. We're all so excited to see what you grow into. And we wouldn't ever let a silly thing like you not knowing what Mei's favorite video game is after four flippin' weeks get in the way of that. That kind of shit will come. I mean, hell, kid, you barely know who **you** are right now."

Ain't that the truth, Ranko mused as she stepped forward again. "Then... *what do we do*? How does it get better?"

"We talk. We get to know each other." The taller woman reached down, rumpling the crushed velvet hat on her teenage companion's head. "We be **sisters**."

Ranko beamed, nodding intently. "I think I can do **that!**"

Ayako threw her arm around her sister's shoulder again. "You bet your ass you can. Now, let's get down to business. Anybody you got ideas for? Who do you need help with?"

The redhead stroked her chin after returning Ayako's side hug, smiling as she glanced down at the black cross-body bag whose strap rested between her breasts. "Well, Izzi saw a bag she really liked when she took me shopping for my birthday, but she didn't get it, so... maybe that, if it's not too much?"

The elder sister giggled. "Well, you've got her dead to rights. Buy that girl a nice

purse, and she'll have your baby."

"Let's not get ahead of ourselves," Ranko said with a giggle. "I mean, I've only known her for a **month!**"

Ayako grinned as she stepped forward again. "True, and besides, we wouldn't want to make **Akane** jealous!"

"I... *wha... huh?*" Ranko stammered, but no coherent words came out of her mouth. "It's... I..."

"Oh, please," Ayako said, tittering at her sister's frustration. "Look me in the eyes and tell me you don't love that girl, and I'll eat that fluffy-ass hat you're wearing." She stepped forward again, all but watching steam escape her little sister's ears.

Ranko gasped, stomping her foot defiantly. "I do **n...**" She blinked at the skeptical look in her sister's eyes. "I... **I...**"

Ayako giggled, bopping her kid sister playfully on the nose with the tips of her fingers. "*Aaaaand*, it looks like I'll still have room for lunch."

"*But, I... I... aww, damn it!*" Ranko shrunk under her sister's tittering gaze, looking down at the floor as she trudged forward in the line.

The taller woman nudged her sister to get her attention again. "You ready? We're almost there!"

"Ready for *what?*" Ranko lifted her eyes from the ground as she reached the front row of the snaking line, only then seeing what it was she was actually queued for. The little cottage had what seemed like a small stage built in front of it, and on it sat a large, green velvet chair with gold-painted trim that could have almost been mistaken for a throne. It was backed by an arc of five brightly-decorated Christmas trees festooned with oversized glittery balls of every color, roughly the size of Ranko's head. Long ribbons spiraled to their tops, capped by silver sparkling stars, and soft, white twinkling lights illuminated them ethereally from within their branches.

Seated on the great throne was a large, chubby man, wearing a coat and matching pants of bright red, a thick black belt with a brass buckle cinching it around his rotund waist. He wore a fairly obviously false long white beard, and a matching red conical hat atop his head. A young girl of no more than six, in a sparkly white dress, was balanced on his right knee.

Two tall, blonde women, both wearing striped red-and-green leggings over green

tunics, shuttled about between the line and the seated man. A third attendant, a young man with a pronounced square jaw that was probably about Mei's age, was similarly attired, frantically clicking at the flash button of a professional camera on a tripod.

"Aya, what the hell is..."

Ranko's sister laughed, though there was a tinge of sadness in it. She threw her arm over her companion's shoulder again. "Yeah, I kinda figured you didn't know what this was. That's why you've gotta do it."

As she spoke, one of the attendants collected the little girl from the seated man's knee, holding her by the hand as she toddled back toward her parents. The other attendant ushered the little girl's younger brother forward. She lifted him up, depositing him onto the rotund man's lap.

"Aya, I don't understand. What's this about?" Ranko looked around nervously. "Like, these are all little kids and stuff..."

Ranko's elder companion smiled reassuringly. "So, we're gonna go visit with Santa there. It's easy! You just sit on his lap and tell him what you want for Christmas, and they take a super cute picture."

"I am not sitting on some dude's lap!" Ranko's eyes widened, and she shook her head emphatically. "I don't even do that for guys when they ask at **work**, and they're **paying customers!**"

Ayako cackled, shaking her head in amused disbelief. "Oh, *honey*. What are we gonna **do** with you? This is different. It's okay. If it'll make you feel better, I'll do it first. You'll see there's nothing gross or weird about it. He won't do anything. It's not like the drunks at the bar."

Ranko looked around, ensuring most of the small children were distracted enough to not be listening to her, and leaned in close to her sister. *"Like, these kids do **know** that's not really Santa Claus, right?"*

Snickering as she wrapped her arms around her sister's neck, Ayako responded in a similarly lowered voice, close to her ear. *"How do you **know** it's not?"*

"Because it's..." Ranko gesticulated in the direction of the portly man sitting on the velvet throne. "I mean, *come on!*"

Smirking deviously, Ayako gave a little shrug in the direction of her sister. "A test, then," she said, still keeping her voice lowered. "They do it all the time in the movies."

When you get up there, you ask Santa for something *impossible*. Something that couldn't *possibly* happen without *magic*. And then, if you get what you asked for, you'll know."

As Ayako finished her challenge, one of the attendants carried the boy in black back to his parents. The other, the taller of the two women, approached Ayako. "You're up. Just you?"

Ayako gestured to her right with a bright smile. "And my baby sister. It's her **first time** meeting Santa!"

"Awwww. Well, come on up, ladies!" The slender, attractive young attendant in the elf costume gave Ranko a thousand-watt smile as she led Ayako and the blushing redhead up onto the little stage. Tinsel and fake snow was spread all over it, other than a small red carpeted area immediately surrounding the oversized chair. Ayako approached the throne readily, but Ranko held a step or two back.

"Well, hello there, young lady," *Santa* said, emitting a deep **ho, ho, ho!** as she approached his seat. "Merry Christmas!"

Smiling reassuringly at Ranko, Ayako gingerly lowered herself to the man's right knee, careful to keep most of her weight on the floor. "Merry Christmas to you, too, Santa!"

I swear, that dude's hand gets within the same postal code as her butt, and he's gonna need eight reindeer to haul his fat ass to the emergency room, Ranko thought with a watchful glare, feeling her fist clench at her side.

"So, tell me, miss..."

"Ayako," replied the woman in the mall Santa's lap, in response to his unspoken question.

Santa chuckled merrily, nodding with a smile under his false white beard. "Ayako! Of **course!** And tell me, miss Ayako... what would *you* like for Christmas?"

The black-haired woman crossed her ankles, shifting more of her weight to the gold-painted wooden arm of the velvet chair. "Well, I'd love a new wok, I think!"

Good to know, Aya, Ranko thought, cracking a small smile through her protective watchfulness. *I didn't have the foggiest freakin' idea what to get for you. Great job, Santa. Look at you, helping out after all.*

Santa grinned, nodding. "A practical girl. Fair enough. Santa will see what he can

do! **Ho, ho, ho!**”

Ayako rose to her feet, walking back over to Ranko and taking her hand. “C’mon, kiddo. Your turn.” She dragged her recalcitrant sister closer to the green plush chair. “Santa, this is my baby sister. She’s never actually gotten to meet you before.”

The seated man reached out his arm invitingly for the nervous redhead, waving her closer. “Well, don’t be shy. Come closer, honey.”

I really don’t wanna... but... all these people are watchin’. I’m gonna embarrass Aya if I don’t... dammit. Ranko trepidatiously approached, and *Santa* patted his thigh through his thick red winter pants.

Don’t be weird... please don’t be weird...

Ranko slowly rested her backside on *Santa*’s lap, crossing her ankles tightly enough to crush a watermelon between her knees under her sweater dress. She looked up at the man, forcing herself to smile through the flicker of multiple hot white camera flashes.

“What’s **your** name, little girl,” *Santa* asked excitedly, seeming to put a bit more effort into his performance than he had with Ayako.

The young redhead flushed hot enough to boil water at being called a *little girl*. Whether his extra ebullience was because Ayako had told him it was a new experience for her, or to try to allay her nerves, Ranko did not know, but her smile softened and became more sincere in response to his question. While she’d gotten accustomed to giving her new name to hundreds of customers a night at the Phoenix, both at their tables and from the stage, she rarely got an opportunity to do so outside of work. Something about the simple act of saying her name outside those four walls, and having no one question it, made her identity feel more real to her, as if it helped to convince her that it wasn’t still just an act she was putting on for the benefit of the family that ran the bar and called itself her own. “I’m **Ranko**, Santa! Good to meet you.”

“It’s wonderful to meet you too, miss Ranko! Now, tell Santa... *have you been a good girl this year?*” The red-clad man lowered his voice as he asked, as if to imply to her that if she hadn’t, it would be their little secret.

Ranko swallowed hard, her face glowing brighter than the quintet of Fraser firs behind the throne at the idea of being a **good girl**. Her mirthful grin faded a bit as she thought about it, though.

Well, let’s see, she thought pensively. *Back in February, I lost a fight with an old*

woman and turned into a girl forever. Then I spent six months hating everybody and everything, and ran away from home. I abandoned Akane and everybody I ever knew. I tried to punch my way into a job, and when that didn't work, I damn near offed myself in a city park. I lied to a nice old lady and her daughters so I could get a job slinging beers in short skirts. I kissed a girl yesterday, right after deciding to try to be one. Oh, and I almost killed a dude in an alley last week with my bare hands. He kinda had it coming though, so...

"I'm really *trying*, Santa."

The mall Santa threw his head back, letting out a deep **ho, ho, ho** that shook the whole of his body under Ranko's backside. "Aren't we all, honey? I'm sure you're doing a *wonderful* job, and Santa is very proud of you."

Man, Ranko thought, biting her lip gently. *Pretty fuckin' sad that you're a fuckin' fairy tale, and you're also the first man to ever say that to me.*

"So, Ranko..." *Santa* reached out, giving the girl on his lap a gentle poke on the nose with his white-gloved index finger. "... what would **you** like for Christmas? More than anything else in the world, what do **you** want?"

The redhead's face flushed crimson again. *Ask for something impossible, huh, Aya?* She leaned in close, putting her arm over the back of the chair and whispering something in the man's ear. To do so, she had to rest nearly all of her weight on his lap.

Beneath her, *Santa* coughed and sputtered as if he'd nearly choked on his own tongue. His eyes bulged and his face reddened as if he'd just been fed a fistful of wasabi. "I, *ummm*. Well. I... I'll have... I'll have to... just... see what I can do."

Ranko giggled brightly, hopping to her feet with a bit of a self-satisfied flounce. "Merry Christmas, Santa!"

"*M... merry C-christmas*," the mall Santa sputtered as Ranko flitted off the stage with a bounce in her step to rejoin Ayako, who was holding the photos from both girls' encounters with Father Christmas in her hand.

Ayako led the tittering redhead away from the crowd, turning to her once they'd cleared the group by a few dozen meters. "You little **minx!** What did you **say** to that poor man?!" She smirked, rolling her eyes and joining her in her laughter. "You asked him something about **Akane, didn't you?!**"

Ranko flashed her sister a spritely grin. "Oh, c'mon, now, Aya! You know how it works." She winked her right eye, nibbling mischievously on the corner of her lower

lip.

“If you tell people what you wish for, it doesn’t come true.”

“Alright, that’s Mei and Izzi done! What you thinkin’ next, superstar? Yui, maybe?” Ayako grinned at her family’s youngest charge as the pair exited the mall’s only store specializing in video games. *She looks like she’s having so much fun. I can tell how badly she wanted to do this, and she just didn’t want to ask for help to pull it off.*

She sighed happily, an easy smile forming on her slightly-chapped lips as she remembered a very similar shopping trip she’d been on in the very same mall three Christmases prior. *Poor Mei was in the middle of detoxing, and she **still** had the time of her life that day. I’m so grateful to Mama for suggesting I take her back then. I guess me doing it twice with the new girl before her first Christmas with us makes it officially a family tradition.*

Ranko shrugged in her sister’s direction. “I am **completely** drawing a blank on her, Aya. She just doesn’t talk to me about anything except work, and... well, *me*, I guess. But, she’s been so good to me. I **really** want to do something special for her, and I don’t even know where to start.” She strode the mall’s cavernous interior central corridor at a brisk pace alongside her companion as she spoke.

“Don’t take it personally, sis. Yui’s a tough nut to crack. She’s...” Ayako sighed as the happy memory was replaced with a sadder one, brushing her rail-straight black hair out of her eyes and trying not to let the plastic bag dangling from her wrist whack her in the face. “She’s not in as good of shape as she lets on, sometimes. I know you look at us, coming to us as you did, like we’re all these paragons of wisdom and *shit-put-together-ness*, but the reality is, all of us are still healing from the circumstances that brought us together in the first place, too. We probably always will be, in some form or another. And Yui... she had a **deep** friggin’ hole to dig out of, and... she just doesn’t really like to scratch at the surface of it too much, so she just glosses over it and hides behind that bar seven days a week.”

The redhead nodded, motioning to the two shopping bags hanging from her sister’s wrist. “You **sure** you don’t want me to carry that stuff?” Receiving a shake of Ayako’s head in the negative by way of reply, she continued. “You seem to be closer to her than any of us. How did **you** manage it?”

Ayako sighed, looking up at the mall’s frosted glass ceiling as she walked as if trying to hide from the memories for another moment. “I mean, part of that is just because we were the first two. We’ve been together the longest. Yui was my first sibling, and vice-versa, and all we had was each other and Mama. Beyond that... well, you may have noticed we’ve all but gone at you with a jackhammer trying to get you to open up about things. Me and Mama both tried that with Yui when she first came to us,

too, with mixed results. Not gonna lie, it was hard sledding for a while, for sure.”

“So, what did it take to get her to finally open up to you? Hugs? The mantra?” Ranko watched her sister intently, eager for Ayako’s help and guidance to connect with the woman that was rapidly becoming her favorite of her four sisters - not that Ranko would ever in a thousand years have admitted as much to Ayako, Izumi, or Mei.

A dark chuckle came in reply. “*Vast quantities of Tennessee bourbon.*”

Ranko giggled spritely. “So **that’s** why she calls Jack Daniels *lip lube* sometimes!”

“You got it, kiddo!” As Ayako answered, the last few notes of *We Wish You a Merry Christmas* faded from the public address speakers overhead.

A lively rock guitar tune began blaring from them in its place. A bank of brass instruments - probably trumpets, Ranko thought, quickly joined in. She’d performed the song during her Christmas concert that had saved the Phoenix not two full days prior. The young redhead raised her arms over her head, crossing her wrists and beginning to rock her hips in her reddish-purple sweater dress. She thrashed her head to the left to face her sister, wearing a smile that dwarfed the noonday sun in radiance. Her ponytail flew up behind, nearly coiling itself around her right bicep. “Oh, I freakin’ **love** this song!”

“*Out of all the reindeers, you know you’re the mastermind! Run, run, Rudolph! Randolph ain’t too far behind!*”

The impromptu performance escalated, with Ranko slashing back and forth on her ankles in front of her sister. With every step, she launched the chunky heels of her black stage boots - the warmest shoes she owned - up high enough behind her to almost kick herself in the ass as she danced. Her hips moved like they were full of water; always fluid, and never for a moment still.

“**Get it, girl! Wooooo!**” Ayako laughed as she watched her sister dance, noticing that a trickle of other shoppers had begun to stop and watch as well.

“*Said Santa to a boy child, ‘What have you been longin’ for?’ ... Whoa, ‘All I want for Christmas is a **rock n’ roll electric guitar!**’...*”

Ranko giggled as she bopped through the mall’s tiled center concourse, the infectious guitar animating her body like a musical marionette. “It’s not my fault! I can’t help it! It’s just too much freakin’ fun!”

It was only then that she noticed the first few people who had paused their shopping trip to watch her. She blushed, but the quiet, timid part of her that coaxed her to stop

embarrassing herself was immediately shouted down by the thundering demand in her heart. *I am a performer. Aya said so herself.*

*“And then, away went Rudolph, whizzin’ like a **shoo-oo-tin’ star!**”*

She blinked in surprise as she felt a pair of strong hands on her rocking hips from behind. Ranko’s hand came down from its position, raised in front of her face with her fingers splayed wide over her thousand-watt smile. She clenched her fingers tight, preparing to throw a punch on instinct at whomever had grabbed her. She flashed her eyes behind her, and they landed on Ayako just as her much taller sister lifted her slender frame up off of the floor. Ranko was deposited on her feet, her black heeled boots resting on the edge of a raised concrete planter that stood about waist high to the redhead.

The assembling shoppers whooped as Ranko was elevated, and Ranko beamed as she realized why she’d been lifted up from the mall concourse floor.

Aya gave me a stage.

The jubilant redhead had already been the picture of joy, but the simple realization that she was *entertaining a crowd* rocketed through her soul like a quadruple shot of espresso. She smiled so broadly it hurt her cheeks as she reached over her shoulder behind herself, pulling the white ribbon out of her ponytail and letting it fall to the white tile floor off the edge of the planter. As the gathering crowd cheered, she thrashed her head back and forth, letting her newly-freed hair fly in flaming waves over her shoulders as they cascaded out from the faux fur-trimmed bottom of her green Santa hat. She cared not for the few strands of hair that caught on the backs of the golden heart studs in her earlobes that were almost ready to be replaced.

*“Run, run, Rudolph! Santa’s gotta make it to town, yeah! Santa, make him hurry! Tell him he can take the freeway down! And then, away went Rudolph, whizzin’ like a **merry-go-round!**”*

The young performer had no microphone, so she made no effort to sing along with the jaunty tune. Her black leather purse clapped repeatedly against her left hip as she moved. *Screw it. I’ll use it,* she decided in the space between heartbeats. She playfully swatted the bag back against her thigh with her open palm in time with the beat as she bopped across the three-meter-wide square planter.

Even Ayako, easily the least extroverted of the Phoenix’ quintet of wayward girls, bopped in place with the beat, dropping Ranko’s purchases at her feet and clapping her hands as she watched. The bottom hem of her cinnamon-colored peacoat swayed around the hips of her black jeans like a heavy skirt as she danced along

with her sister. She was far from the only onlooker to do so.

*“Said Santa to a girl child, ‘What would you like most to get?’ ‘Whoa, I want a baby doll that can cry, drink, and scream, **whoa, yeah!** And then away went Rudolph, whizzin’ like a **Saber jet!**”*

Ranko stalked the edge of the square concrete planter as if it were her own personal runway, wiggling and giggling as she rested her hand on the thin braided trunk of the Guiana chestnut tree planted in its center. She rocked her backside in her tight sweater dress as she made a full orbit around the tree trunk, waving to people on all four sides of her makeshift stage. It was as if the tree had been planted there years ago for the explicit purpose of being Ranko Tendo’s dance prop on some random Friday morning in some future December.

The song ended, and Ranko gave a bow at the waist to the sixty or so assembled onlookers. Two large men, both of whom had been watching with their wives, approached the planter, offering up their hands to her.

*What the... Ranko blinked, watching them skeptically. **What the heck do you guys want?***

“C’mon, let us help you down,” the tall blond man on Ranko’s left coaxed. “Long way to jump in those heels.”

*The redhead’s face caught fire. **They wanna... help me? Like, don’t they know who I am? I’m a world-class martial artist, buddy. I can run on chain-link fences. I can do capoeira blindfolded. I’m freaking unstoppable - until you hit me, anyway. Then I’m... low key kinda fucked. But anyway. Let’s not worry about that too much right now. In any case, I’m not helpless! I can get down off of a half-meter ledge, dude!***

She was about to swat the blond man’s hand away when she spied Ayako in the corner of her eye. Ranko’s sister gave her a *go ahead* gesture with a flick of her wrist, as if shooing a child off to school.

Ranko sighed, trying not to let the men see it. *Oh, merciful fuck. She’s right. Gotta keep up appearances. Dainty little airhead mode, go, I guess.* Forcing herself into a tittering smile, she offered her hands down to the two gentlemen. **“Omigods! Thanks, you guys!”**

Each man took one of her hands and lifted her by the arms, finding it effortless to support the weight of the slender performer. She had not been particularly heavy even before leaving the Tendo home, but her body had yet to fully return to its normal weight after two months of barely subsisting on the occasional rice ball from the subway station vending machines.

Ranko felt the man on her left reach behind her. *Dude, if you grab my ass, I swear, I'm gonna fuck you up right here in front of your kids*, she thought with a defensive glare. The man's strong hand landed respectfully on the small of her back, however, helping to support her as she was lowered to the mall concourse floor. The sensation of his hand sliding on her skin through her soft sweater dress sent a shiver up her spine, which Ranko did her best to block from her mind.

"Isn't that the girl from Phoenix bar, in Minato?!" A hopeful-looking college student, a shlubby-looking boy maybe two years her senior, approached as the two gentlemen released Ranko's hands. Ranko noticed that one or two of his words had been slightly misspoken, but she was able to parse his meaning. His accent definitely was not Japanese.

Ranko's cheeks could have fried an egg. *People recognize me? Like, this far away from the bar?!* She beamed, nodding emphatically. "That's me! Ranko Tendo, cocktail waitress extraordinaire and singer... well, regular ordinaire, I guess!"

The trepidatious collegiate fumbled in his green plastic bag, bearing the logo of the same video game store where Ranko had bought Mei's Christmas gift. He produced from it a long receipt on crinkly thermal paper. "Would you... *sign?*" He held the coiling scroll out to her in a trembling hand.

"Oh, I..." Ranko covered her mouth with her splayed fingers. "I... sure! Does anyone have a pen or something?"

Ayako approached, digging in her burgundy leather purse for a fine-point black marker and handing it to her sister.

Ranko looked the man over as she took the receipt paper from his hand, noticing the rainbow logo on his shirt. "University of Hawai'i, huh?"

The young fan nodded, smiling through a nervous chuckle. "Yep! First time in Japan. Checking it in on my Christmas break."

With a bright grin, Ranko laid the receipt flat on the edge of the planter that had just been pressed into service as her makeshift stage. *Let's try this*, she thought as she began to write. A moment later, she handed the thin, translucent strip of paper back to the young gentleman.

"What does..." He held it up to her, gesturing to the seven katakana symbols she had written in a tight row above her romaji signature.

Ranko giggled brightly. "Just read them out loud, if you can?"

With the slow, careful consideration it took for a non-native Japanese speaker to recognize each symbol, he began to pronounce the symbols in order. “*Me. Re. Ka. Ri. Ki. Ma. Ka.*”

The redhead nodded, beaming in pride. “Yep! That's how you say Merry Christmas in Hawai'i, right?!” *Look at me! I'm so freaking smart.*

The Hawaiian man laughed, his grin widening. “Close enough!” He reached back into his bag for a thick, magazine-sized paperback book, a strategy guide for *Final Fantasy II*. He opened the book to a page near its middle, pressing the receipt between the pages to protect it as he slipped it back into the plastic bag. “Thank you so much!”

“You got it! Thanks for watching!” Ranko turned back to Ayako as the autograph-seeker disappeared back into the bustling holiday crowd, capping the marker and reaching out to hand it back to her sister. “Thanks, Aya. I can't believe somebody way out in freaking **Shibuya** is asking me to sign shit. Like, **what?!**”

Ayako giggled, shaking her head and gesturing back toward Ranko with her neck. “Keep it in your purse.” She reached out, draping her arm over her diminutive sister's shoulders.

*“Something tells me you're gonna **need it**, kiddo.”*

“Try this!” Ranko slid a trapezoidal paper container across the table to her sister, jabbing her chopsticks into the box. “That’s *really* good!”

Ayako took the chopsticks, scooping a bite of the pork lo mein out of the white takeout container and popping it into her mouth. “*Mm!* I don’t know what they did to that, but *wow!* I knew I should’a got that.” She glanced to her left as she swallowed, grinning a bit and handing her little sister a napkin. “Here. You’ve got something right over here,” she mentioned, gesturing to the left corner of her mouth.

Blushing, Ranko took the napkin and wiped her face. “Sorry! Hard to be clean when they’re dripping like that.”

“Yeah, maybe,” Ayako said, lowering her voice and widening her smile. “*But you wanna be cute when the guys at the next table are checking you out, don’cha?*”

Ranko’s eyes widened almost as much as her mouth. “They *what?!*” She snapped her head to the right, by which time both of the college-aged men at the next table over had averted their eyes.

Laughing, Ayako shook her head and let her forehead fall into her palm, her elbow resting on the resin tabletop of their two-top in the mall food court. “*Good gods, kiddo,*” she whispered. “*You have absolutely no chill for this kind of stuff, do ya? You’re not supposed to let ‘em know you caught ‘em looking!*”

“Well, then they shouldn’t *look!*” Ranko glanced back at the table, where the two men were clearing their trash. *They’re probably haulin’ ass ‘cause we noticed ‘em.* She lowered her voice, leaning over the table. “*Besides, I’m...*”

“Gay,” Ayako whispered just as her sister finished her sentence with “*taken.*”

The redhead swallowed hard, rocking back in her chair. *I never thought of it that way. It was always that I liked girls ‘cause I was a dude, but... I’m a girl now. So if I still like girls... I mean, it makes sense, I just never thought about it like that, with that actual word. It makes it so much more complicated.* She sighed heavily. *Akane’s never gonna be okay with that, even if she does know I used to be a dude.*

Ayako broke her companion’s melancholy with a giggle. “Well, both, I suppose.” She reached across the table, nudging the teenager in the shoulder through her mauve sweater dress. “*Don’t look so embarrassed. It’s no big deal. Just ask Yui.*”

Ranko winced. *You mean the girl whose girlfriend killed herself when her parents found out? And almost made Yui do the same? She's the one who's gonna tell me there's nothing to worry about?* She tried to distract herself with a bite of her lo mein, buying herself a moment to think.

The elder woman must have noticed the consternation in the younger's face, because she shook her head and smiled even before Ranko could finish chewing. "Look, Ranko. Yui had a bad experience, it's true. She had about as bad of an experience with it as you *can* have. But it didn't scare her off of it. She hasn't dated anybody since, but it's not because it's bad to be... what she is, and what you are. She just works all the time, and like we talked about, she doesn't really open up to anybody. She'll find the right girl when she's ready. We can't all be as lucky as you, with our soulmates delivering themselves to our doorstep with a bow on their heads."

Akane?! My... soulmate?! Ranko almost choked on her noodles. Her face went crimson, and not entirely from the coughing and sputtering. I mean, I can't deny how I feel when I'm around her. At least, not anymore.

"I wish I could have known Yui, *before*," Ranko said, poking at her food with her disposable bamboo chopsticks. "Before she got so sad, and so closed-off."

Ayako sat back in her chair, sucking thoughtfully on the plastic straw delivering cold green tea to her lips. "What do you want to know?"

"Huh?" Ranko blinked in surprise, putting her chopsticks back down in the receptacle.

The black-haired woman grinned. "I said she didn't talk *much*, not that she didn't talk **any**. And I'm not sworn to secrecy. Well, not about most things, anyway."

Ranko thought for a moment, trying to choose a question to ask. Yui was rapidly becoming her favorite sister, and also her best friend, and she knew nearly nothing about the woman beyond her age and her name. She wanted to know *everything*, but knew it was far too much to ask. As she thought, she glanced down at the bags in the chair tucked under the table between her and her sister, containing the Christmas gifts she'd already purchased for Mei and Izumi. "What kinds of things does she like?"

Ayako smiled more softly, giving her sister a gentle nod. "She doesn't get much into television or movies, or reading either. Rarely has the time. She used to watch rugby on the TVs in the bar, but we started turning 'em off when the karaoke got more popular. Of course, that was before **you** showed up, and now nobody wants to sing karaoke, either. Can't say as I blame 'em. Who the hell would wanna follow

your act?!” The tall woman smirked, tipping her cup in her sister’s direction.

“Does she collect anything?” Ranko asked hopefully.

“She told me one time that, before she moved out of her parents’ place, she used to have mounds of stuffed animals. They all had names, and she’d talk to them about stuff. She was an only child, before us anyway, and as you might’ve guessed, her parents weren’t exactly the open type. Must’ve been lonely for her.”

The redhead grinned broadly. *Explains why she couldn’t stop looking at that giant-ass bear they left me when I got hurt in the bar.* It felt good to imagine Yui getting to be so innocent, before the harsh realities of the world had hardened her heart. “I’m surprised. I went over to her place one time; her and Mei invited me over for lunch one day. I didn’t see any in her room at all, I don’t think.”

Nodding sagely, Ayako took another draught of her tea. “She had to leave ‘em all behind when she left home. I offered to get her one, when she first came to us, and nothing really came of it. She always says it’s a silly thing to spend money on. *I’m a grown-up now, I’ve got bills and shit, that sorta thing.*”

“Did she, by chance, ever tell you what her **favorite** was?” Ranko leaned forward hopefully, the gears beginning to turn in her mind.

With another sharp nod, and a widening smile, Ayako set her empty paper cup on the tabletop. “A dolphin, if memory serves.”

Ranko rocketed out of her seat, snatching up her mostly-depleted takeout container and both empty drink cups. “C’mon, Aya! We’ve got a **mission!**”



Hauling three large plastic bags over her shoulder, Ranko plodded after Ayako through the center of the mall. After three hours, she was beginning to get tired, but she made no show of it to her elder sister. *Can’t have her thinking I don’t appreciate what she’s doing. I’m so glad to be able to do stuff for the girls for Christmas. It broke my heart not to be able to before she offered.*

“Okay,” Ayako said, slowing down to let Ranko catch up. She carried a bag of her own, a pair of blue jeans she’d picked up for her husband Kage at the same store where Ranko had bought one for Izumi’s husband Kaito. “How we holding up, kiddo?”

Ranko beamed, looking down at her haul. “Well, we’ve got Yui, Izzi, Mei, Kaito, and Hoshi dealt with. I can’t shop for you while you’re here with me, obviously!”

The taller woman crinkled her nose and gave a slight shake of her head. “You don’t have to do anything for me.”

“Yes I do,” Ranko insisted. “I can do at least that much on my own. You’ve made it possible for me to be a part of a real Christmas with a... with **our family** for the first time, Aya. It’s the least I can do. I know what I’m getting you and Kage, too, I’ll just need to catch a train to a store tomorrow.”

Shrugging, Ayako nodded. “Alright, if you’re sure. But don’t go too crazy, okay? Kage and I are still struggling to find places in the new place for all the stuff we **already** have.”

“Promise!” Ranko agreed, scanning the nearby stores with her eyes as she walked. “So that just leaves Mama.”

Giggling, Ayako raised one eye skeptically down at her sister. “You **sure** you’re not forgetting anybody?”

Ranko’s eyes roamed over her bags again. “I don’t think so, unless you’re hiding another sister somewhere you haven’t told me about yet,” she replied with a tittering laugh.

“What about **Akane?**” Aya asked, a devious smirk on her lips. “Wouldn’t wanna wind up in the doghouse already, now, would you?”

The redhead swallowed hard, her cheeks warming until she could swear she felt steam escaping from her ears. “*I... I didn’t think w... we were gonna...*”

“Of course we are, ya blockhead!” Ayako replied with a chuckle. “If she’s important to you, I want to make sure you can get her something. And if that face is telling me anything, it’s the undeniable fact that that girl is **important** to you.” She flashed her younger sister a mischievous wink, motioning over her shoulder with her thumb. “There’s a *lingerie store* over there...”

Ranko choked on her own saliva, her eyes bulging as if all the air in her lungs was trying to escape through her eye sockets at once. “*Are you out of your... what?!*”

Ayako cackled at her sister’s reaction. “I mean, if you don’t know her size, you at least know *yours*, right? Maybe we should just focus on **wrapping** her present.”

“**Ayako Jirito!**” Ranko’s face could have boiled water - not that she wanted

anything to do with boiling water in her current form. “Are you fucking **crazy?!?**”

“Oh, *honey*,” Akayo said between mirthful belly laughs. “The look on your face, girl! Seriously, though, if that’s what you wanna do...”

Ranko shook her head vigorously, her eyes still wide. “No **way!** We aren’t... *doing that*. I’m not sure if we’re even **gonna** do that!” *I’m not even sure how we would do that!*

“Alright, alright!” Ayako tittered brightly, throwing her arm over the shorter girl’s shoulders and pinning her ponytail to her back with it. “Deep breath, kiddo. I didn’t mean to fluster you. Well, okay, I *did*, but not, like, in a *bad* way. We can do something else for her.”

Yeah, but what? Ranko walked a few steps to the center of the aisle between the shops, batting the fluffy ball of her green Santa hat out of her eyes as she read over the backlit directory of stores. *It can’t be anything too mushy and scare her off. It can’t be anything too personal, that her dad or Kasumi would figure out about m... us. Nothing too athletic or sporty; don’t want her to think I’m doing the whole ‘uncute tomboy’ thing again. Shit, this is harder than I thought.*

As she pondered the directory of some two hundred businesses, the last few notes of *Rockin’ Around the Christmas Tree* faded from the air, pumped through the vast array of recess-mount speakers dotting the ceiling of the huge enclosed space. *Man, they’re really hammering the Christmas stuff in here. I guess it makes people buy more shit.* A new song began, the lyrics preceding the first note of instrumentation.

“I really can’t stay...”

The redhead grinned, swaying a bit with the music. Less than two days ago, she and Akane had sung the song together in front of a full house at the Phoenix. Ranko had spared her the embarrassment in the second performance, instead replacing *Baby, It’s Cold Outside* with *I Saw Mommy Kissing Santa Claus* in the set list. Still, Ranko couldn’t help but replay the few minutes she’d shared with Akane on her stage - the center of her universe - in her mind. *She seemed to have so much fun with me... and it made her wanna ki...*

She hid her face in her hands, feeling the warmth of her cheeks in her palms. The butterflies doing loop-the-loops through the nest of lo mein in her stomach showed no signs of stopping. When she looked up from her fingers, though, the spark of an idea lit her ice-blue eyes, and she began looking over the directory with a new intent. *There’s gotta be a music store in here somewhere. That’d be something that would tell her exactly how special that night was to me - and nobody would ever*

guess what it meant or who it was from unless they were in the bar that night.



Ranko walked out of the record store, a small pink bag containing a pair of cassettes dangling from her wrist and a smile on her lips. “Alright! Just one to go!” She turned her head to the left, grinning toward Ayako. “What in the actual hell do we do for Mama? I mean, the woman doesn’t even fuckin’ wear *clothes*. It’s just her jacket, the same two pairs of black jeans and whatever free tee shirts the booze vendors drop off for her.”

Ayako shrugged her shoulders, the remainder of Ranko’s purchases slapping against her hips through her long coat. “I normally get her gift certificates, and it wouldn’t surprise me if the old bat spends ‘em on freakin’ groceries. She’s the no-frills queen of the world, I gotta tell ya. Izzi definitely didn’t get her fabulous streak from *her*, that’s for sure!”

The redhead nodded furtively. “And I have no idea what she’d need at her place; I’ve never even *been* there. Can *you* think of anything?”

Stopping to pile the several bulky bags she carried on a nearby bench at the center of the main concourse, Ayako shrugged again. “You’ll see it on Christmas; we always do presents at her place on Christmas and then dinner after. But that’s too late. I can’t really think of much, honestly. It’s pretty sparse there too; I mean, she’s hardly ever there except to sleep. Woman practically lives at the bar.” She winced a bit as she took in her sister’s expression. “I didn’t *mean anything by...*”

“I know,” Ranko said, dismissing Ayako’s concern with a wave of her hand. “I get it. I mean, even her office is so... *depressing*. It’s a shame. She’s such an amazing person, and she spends all her time in that *cave* surrounded by old bills and dead plants. She deserves better.”

Ayako smirked. “Do I detect the hint of an idea forming in that brain of yours?”

Ranko blushed. “Why, is there smoke comin’ outta my ears?” Snickering, she slowly swiveled in place on her feet, looking over the surrounding storefronts. *There’s gotta be something...* “Hey,” she called to Ayako just as the elder woman’s backside had made contact with the wooden bench next to Ranko’s bags. “You think there’s room on the wall behind her desk for a picture?” She gestured across the mall’s central thoroughfare to a small shop jammed full of canvas pictures, some framed, some not. “Just something to... I dunno, give it some *life* in there?”

“Behind her desk, no,” Ayako thought, closing her eyes and picturing the space in her mind. “But behind the couch, maybe, if it wasn’t *too* huge.”

Nodding, Ranko reached for her bags. “I’m gonna go check out that art store over there. Maybe I can find something. You wanna come, or do you need to chill a minute?”

Ayako sighed, looking down at her heavy, faux fur-lined suede boots. “Yeah, gimme a sec, and I’ll be right behind you. You can leave the bags with me; there’s not a lot of room in there.”

“Thanks!” Ranko stuffed the bag with Akane’s gifts down into the larger bag containing Mei’s, flitting off in the direction of the shop. She was glad for the form-fitting sweater dress she wore; the aisles were so narrow that she was certain a more loose-fitting skirt would have knocked pictures off of their precarious perches on the racks. On the floor, other canvases stood six and seven deep leaned against the slatted wall, and several other shoppers were slowly flipping through one stack after another to try to browse all of the available options.

What the heck would I even get her a picture of? I mean, all the woman likes is beer. Ranko exhaled heavily, beginning to flip through the first stack. It contained mostly prints of impressionist paintings; reproductions of van Goghs, Monets, and works from other European artists the teenager hadn’t heard of, either. *Sheesh. It’s a bar, not a museum. Boooo-ring.*

Letting the wooden frames fall back against the wall with a loud series of *clacks*, she began thumbing through the second column of placards. This one featured still-lives of various plants; a bowl of fruit here, a vase of roses there. Ranko thought of the picture above her bed, a purple vase full of vibrant lavender orchids, and it made her smile. *But what kinds of plants does Mama like? She has pots for plants in her office, but they’re all crispier than the potato skins we serve. I think there’s cactuses in the Sahara that have gotten water more recently.* Resolving herself to keep up on caring for the family matriarch’s plants as long as she lived above the bar, provided Hana ever got any more, Ranko’s search continued.

The third column of pictures were all photographs printed at poster size and framed under glass. There were two featuring sports cars, one depicting a well-tanned blonde in a skin-tight red swimsuit with an orange bodyboard under her arm, and an aerial photograph of a packed soccer stadium. *Well, I found the designated boy section,* Ranko thought with a smirk as she flipped past a poster of a dark-skinned boxer standing over a fallen opponent.

As the frames rattled back against the wall, a brief flash of red and orange caught the corner of her eye as the young couple to her left rifled through the selections.

Wait... was that what I thought it was? Ranko waited to delve into the fourth array of canvases, waiting until the pair ahead of her chose a reproduced painting of a cherry blossom tree and made their way toward the register. She skipped over several rows of pictures to reach the one the couple had vacated, ignoring the rolling French countryside in a white frame and the blue frame containing a scene from a rustic Italian kitchen.

Yes. Oh, fuck, yes.

She pulled out a jet-black frame, nearly a meter tall and half that across. It had no glass covering the canvas within. The portrait's background was a deep red, save for an orangish yellow oval at the center that looked like the sun - or perhaps just a ball of fire. Silhouetted against it was a majestic red phoenix, its wings and beak pointed skyward as it prepared to take off from some perch obscured by its deep red plumage of flame. The firebird looked positively *regal*, as if it were the most beautiful creature ever to grace the earth, and it *knew it*.

Ranko swallowed hard as her eyes rose to the upper right corner of the frame, but before she could read the yellow price sticker she found there, a hand reached out from behind her and covered it with long, feminine fingers.

"Don't even worry about it," Ayako said as Ranko turned to look up at her sister. *"It's perfect."*

“This is *perfect*,” Mei said with a giggle as she turned her gift over in her hands. It was sky blue, almost the same color as her hair, with pixelated white flowers embroidered onto its nylon body. She pulled open the hook-and-loop closure, examining the internal storage of the small carrying case. “Oh, *rad!* There’s spots for the games and everything!”

Ranko beamed, stealing a quick, victorious glance at Ayako. *Toldja she’d like it.* “Well, I thought, you keep dropping your Game Boy in the bar, and one of these days, it’s gonna break if you don’t have something better than your purse to carry it in.”

With an emphatic nod that sent the red bows in her long blue pigtails bobbing, Mei reached for the shabby yellow cloth drawstring bag that served as her daily driver purse. “I mean, this is the third one I’ve had as it is, so, you’re totally right!” She pulled the grayish device from her purse, tucking it into the padded main compartment before beginning to connect the periwinkle plastic clips of the shoulder strap to the matching loops on either side of the bag.

“At least she only cracked the screen on the second one,” Izumi said, giggling as she sidled back to her spot on the couch between her boyfriend and son, handing Kaito a disposable plastic cup full of eggnog that smelled strongly of cinnamon and rum. “The first one ended up in the freakin’ *fryer.*”

“Proof,” Yui said with a grin at Mei, “that not *everything* is better deep-fried. *Most* things, I’ll grant, but...”

Ranko giggled, pulling her knees under her skirt from her seat on the floor next to the sparsely-decorated Christmas tree in the living room of Hana’s apartment. She wore the velvet green dress and hat from her Christmas concert, it being the most festive outfit she owned. She nearly froze in it on the short walk from the Phoenix in the dawn hours of Christmas morning, but she wanted to fully embrace the event. *I’m having a real Christmas, with a real family. I want them to see just how excited I am. How grateful I am just to get to be a part of it,* she thought as the twinkling white lights on the artificial tree sparkled in her blue eyes.

She smiled brightly up at an orange origami bird, made of a heavy construction paper, that rested on one of the lowest branches of the tree. She had made it that morning, at Hana’s insistence. It took her four tries, but she wanted it to be flawless. It bore her name, written in romaji lettering like the signatures she’d occasionally give bar patrons, along its belly. Most of the tree was decorated with white swans,

but there were eight paper birds of differing colors sprinkled throughout, each with a name written on them. As Hana described it, they were not swans like the white ones, but *phoenixes* - and each represented a member of their family. Hana's black bird rested near the middle alongside Ayako's green and Kage's gray, while Mei's powder blue and Yui's tan bookended the silver plastic star at the treetop. Izumi's fuschia ornament was flanked by Hoshi's red on the left, and the deep purple one Kaito had been invited to make alongside Ranko that morning on its right. *Our little flock. And I get to be a part of it*, Ranko mused in wonder.

So engrossed was she with every detail of the tree that she did not notice the projectile flying at her head. It struck her on the temple, the impact mostly blunted by the overlap of her Santa hat. It didn't matter all that much; even with the power of the Full-Body Cat's Tongue amplifying her every physical sensation, Ranko doubted that the lobbed wad of cerulean wrapping paper would have hurt. "**Hey!**" She turned, gasping in Mei's direction.

"Well, you're not doing your **job**, blockhead! Get in the game, here! The youngest girl's always on distribution and trash duty! Let's **go!**" Mei laughed as Ranko retrieved the wrapping paper from the floor and crammed it down into the bulging black trash bag at her feet.

"She's enjoying that far too much," Hana said with a laugh in the direction of her eldest daughter. She wore a heavy red plaid pair of flannel pajama pants and a plain black sweatshirt, her hair held back with a simple white headband.

Ayako nodded, grinning at the redhead seated on the floor. "Can't say as I blame her; she spent three Christmases down there. She was just hoping for a promotion before it ended up being Hoshi's turn."

"Aww, man, do I **have to?**" Hoshi whined, looking up from his new Godzilla figurine for the first time in twenty minutes.

Laughing, Ranko shook her head as she reached behind her for a bulky square package wrapped in a shiny gold foil paper with a pair of large silver bows with long tails that dangled almost all the way to the floor. "Nah, little man - I showed up just in time to spare you. Let's see, this one's for..." She searched the package for a loose bit of wrapping paper that had been folded over itself and taped to the box between the bows. Finding it, she opened it like a tiny book, reading the immaculate calligraphy written within. "**Me**, from Izzi, Kaito and Hoshi. Aww, **you guys!** I already got one from you." Indeed, the young redhead was grateful for the heavy violet electric blanket she'd been gifted previously. *Man, that heating thing is gonna feel so good when it gets cold tonight*, she thought with a toothy grin.

Izumi shrugged, sipping from her cup of eggnog with a satisfied grin on her cheeks.

“Well, you need a lot of *stuff*. Besides, there’s three of us. Now, you gonna bitch, or you gonna open it?”

Needing no further encouragement to tear open the paper with her green gel-coated fingernails over the sound of her sisters’ laughter, Ranko extracted a large brown shoebox. It was more square than those she was used to seeing. *Okay?* Popping a few strips of transparent tape holding the box closed, she removed its lid and the crinkly white tissue paper underneath to reveal a pair of white boots with flat soles. They looked to be about ankle-height, made of a puffy, almost plastic material not unlike Mei’s winter coat. The ankle openings were lined with a soft white fur-like material.

“Hopefully, those’ll keep your feet warm,” Izumi explained. “Since you’re always shivering whenever we go out, Little Miss Frosty.”

Yeah, well, the Cat’s Tongue is kind of a bitch in ankle-deep snow, Iz, Ranko thought as she excitedly pulled the thin black boot off of her left foot and slipped the corresponding white one on in its place. She stifled a giggle as the soft fur tickled the backs of her calves. *Definitely gonna need bigger socks with these.* “Oh, wow! Yeah, these are **so** much better, thanks!”

After donning the matching boot and putting her black pair in the box in its stead, she returned the box to the second-largest pile under the tree, where she’d been organizing her gifts. Only Hoshi’s pile was bigger, as Ranko expected given the inexpensive toys the child had received, and the family’s insisting to the boy that half of them had come from Santa Claus himself.

Ranko blushed as she reached for the next wrapped gift, remembering her own brief encounter with “Santa” at the mall a few days prior. *We’ll see if you pull **that** request off, buddy,* she thought with a grin as she checked the gift tag on a large package wrapped in green paper dotted with illustrations of red cartoonish elves and reindeer. *I wonder what Akane’s doing. I hope she’s having fun.*

“To Ayako and Kage, from Yui,” she read aloud before handing the package up to her eldest sister on the loveseat behind her with both hands. “Careful, it’s heavy.”

Grunting as the weight of the box was transferred into her hands, Ayako pulled it back into her lap. She herself was seated on her new husband’s lap, her ankles crossed under the viridian A-line dress she wore. It was printed all over with large red poinsettia blooms. “What do you think it is, babe?”

Kage leaned down and rested his chin on his wife’s shoulder, tickling her neck a bit with his stubble and eliciting a bright laugh and a slight squirm from her. “Based on the size and the weight, I’m thinking... a *pony*.”

“A *pony?! Okay, Mr. Jirito, no more eggnog for you,*” Ayako said as she searched for a seam in the wrapping paper big enough to slip her slender fingers under. She tore the paper from the box, revealing a stainless steel slow cooker. “Oh, wow, Yui! This is gonna be **so great!**”

The blonde shrugged, looking over at Mei with an air of surprise in her eyes. “Yeah! I hear that kind makes really good... food.” Her sister and roommate giggled in response, and Yui hid her face in her hand. *You don't gotta make it **that obvious** you picked it out for me, Mei! Damn, girl!*

“Since we have a master bartender here, maybe you could settle a question for me, Yui,” Kaito asked with a chuckle. “Does red wine or white go best with *food?*”

Giggling almost uncontrollably, his wife-to-be turned to him and answered on her sister's behalf. “Definitely *wet* wine. The very best kind.”

“Look here, you little **shit**, it ain't my fault I've been parked behind the bar for years and never get to go in the kit...” Yui's voice trailed off as the wadded ball of wrapping paper that had been torn from the slow cooker ricocheted off the shoulder of her ivory cable-knit sweater.

Ranko shoved a large box, almost a meter on a side and wrapped in shiny silver foil by a clearly unpracticed hand, across the hardwood floor toward her sister's feet. Despite its size, it seemed to have very little weight to it. “You wanna focus, sis? We're still gonna be opening presents on *Foundation Day* at this rate.”

Leaning down to the floor, Yui picked up the box, a curious expression building on her face. “The hell? What's in here, *air?*” She tore into the paper, letting it fall in a few large shreds to the floor around her ankles and revealing a box labeled as containing four bottles of a popular brand of rum. It had obviously been opened and resealed with clear packing tape.

“*Alright, what in the heck could...*” The blonde popped the last strip of tape free of the box flaps and it burst open, as if its contents did not fit properly in the box without the support. She peered down into the box, her eyes widening - and watering. “*What...*”

Reaching down into the large corrugated box, she extracted a plush bottle-nosed dolphin, its dorsal side blue and underside grey. It was soft to the touch and not firmly stuffed, with large, expressive blue eyes made of plastic and a little indentation atop its head to indicate a blowhole. The bartender's jaw fell slack as she lifted it, examining it from every possible angle. “*It's... who the hell could have... I never told anybody...*”

She set the plush down on her leg, reaching down for the discarded wrapping paper and searching for the tag. Finding it on the third shred of paper she checked, she lifted her eyes across the floor to her youngest sister, who sat silently, watching her with pride painted across her face. *“Ranko, this is...”*

The redhead stood from her cross-legged seat on the floor, closing the three-step distance to stand in front of the battered green recliner that Yui occupied. “You know... a very wise woman told me something once: *our pasts will never go away, but we can choose not to let them mess with the present.*”

Yui rocketed out of her seat, the dolphin nearly falling off the armrest of the chair to the floor. She wrapped her arms tight around Ranko’s neck, resting her elbows on the shorter girl’s shoulders. *“I don’t know how you even knew, but... Ranko, it’s perfect. Thank you.”*

“No, Yui,” Ranko said, her voice muffled as she spoke into the plush sweater sleeve pressed around her. *“Thank you. For everything. For showing me there’s a way out of the hole I was in when you found me.”*

The tall blonde sniffled, lowering her head and wiping her damp eyes on the shoulder pad of Ranko’s green velvet dress. *“I love you, kiddo.”*

With a happy sigh, Ranko squeezed tight around Yui’s waist in return. *“I love you too, big sister.”*

A merry laugh pierced the tender moment, and both women released the hug to turn to Yui’s right and face the source. Mei stood from her white plastic folding chair, shaking her head. “Would you girls mind taking it a little easy on the mushy shit? It is **way** too early to have to redo my makeup.”

“It’s okay,” Yui said, pulling her diminutive sister between herself and Ranko and hugging them both in her arms. The pair almost seemed like children standing next to her, with Yui having nearly thirty centimeters of height advantage over Ranko *before* the heeled boots she wore, and Ranko herself being a few centimeters taller than her next eldest sister. *“It didn’t look that good anyway.”*

“Heey!” Mei whacked Yui in the forearm with her left fist, her right arm still draped over Ranko’s shoulder. “You didn’t say anything before we left the apartment!”

The blonde shrugged, speaking over the laughter of the rest of their haphazard little clan. It all but echoed in the small living room. “You were gonna make us later than we already were, and besides... we’re all family here. All of us already **knew** you’re a fucking disaster.”

Izumi stood from the couch, stretching her back with a loud vocalization as she reached for the ceiling with clenched fists. “Man, we’re gonna have to start earlier next year at this rate! Santa was awfully generous to us again this year. We must’ve been really good!”

“Or at least, **good at it**,” Hana said in reply, earning a blush and a scoff mid-yawn from Izumi.

“Mama!” Izumi shook her head, a look of shock on her face. “In front of Hoshi? **Really?!**”

Yui laughed, throwing her arm over Izumi’s shoulders. Ranko had flitted off behind the Christmas tree, leaving her a free side for hugs. “Kiddo’s growing up in **this** family; he’s gonna have to get used to it.”

The old barkeep started to stand from her seat next to Kage and Ayako, but Ranko waved her back. “Just a second, Mama. There’s one more thing.” She emerged from behind the tree, a large, flat package wrapped in paper depicting a mosaic of lit candles in every color and size in her hands. The family’s youngest ward handed the final gift to Hana, who eyed it curiously.

“Well, go on,” Ranko urged, a contented smile on her face. “Clearly, everybody’s hungry, so...”

Hana tore into the paper, letting it fall to the floor. Her eyes widened as she took in the black-framed canvas painting Ranko and Ayako had selected, a red near-silhouette of a regal-looking phoenix preparing to take flight from its perch against the backdrop of a rising sun.

Ranko reached down, helping tear the paper from the last corner of the unwieldy gift so Hana could see it in full. “I figured, for your office? Give it a little more life, ya know?”

“I think it’s beautiful, Ranko,” Hana said, starting to set the frame down on the floor to stand.

“Hey, Mama?” Mei motioned to the frame, wagging her finger at it. “There’s something written on the back.”

As Ranko looked on, beaming with pride, Hana hefted the frame back into her hands. She turned it over in her lap, beginning to read the characters aloud. The characters were written in a sloppy but careful hand in silver marker to allow them to stand out against the black lacquered frame.

“For the woman who made a bar a home, and made a bunch of strangers a family,” she said in a quavering voice.



“Look out!”

Mei ducked her head, not that she needed the extra clearance as a wooden tray passed harmlessly over her head in Ayako’s hand. “Low bridge!” she exclaimed with a giggle.

Raising her voice over the loud mechanical whirring sound that filled the apartment’s tiny kitchen, Hana rested her hand on Izumi’s back to alert her daughter to her presence. ***“How we looking on the potatoes?”***

Pausing the old, industrial green stand mixer to quell the racket, Izumi looked back over her shoulder with a smile. “Five more minutes, tops? Just trying to get the last few lumps out.”

“Mmph. Needs more butter,” Mei declared as she swallowed, pulling her finger back out of her mouth.

Blinking down at the narrow trench that had been swiped through the mashed potatoes in the mixing bowl, Izumi shot a glare over at her little sister. ***“Mei Hotoro!*** You little...” The brunette sighed, chuckling with a defeated shake of her head. ***“Get me the butter.”***

“I got it,” Ranko said, darting off to retrieve a red ceramic dish that had already been carried into the living room. There, Hana’s small dining table and two folding tables retrieved from the Phoenix had been butted end-to-end and covered with holly red tablecloths to create enough seating for nine people. There were four chairs to each side, with a place of honor for Hana on the table’s far short side. *As befits the head of her clan,* Ranko thought with an easy smile.

She paused for a moment in the narrow archway between the living room and kitchen, watching the chaos as the meal came together. Ayako stood at an electric frying pan, dropping the last few drumsticks of raw chicken into sizzling peanut oil. She wore a red full apron styled to look like a winter dress, as if it were of the same design as Santa Claus’ signature suit, with a thin fringe of white lace dangling from the hem. Mei hovered over the small butcher block island, filling dozens of five-centimeter pie crusts with a bright green mixture from a bulging pastry bag. Izumi

continued coaxing the potatoes into the path of the mixer's twin beaters with a plastic spatula. Hana had lined up a series of stem glasses on one edge of the countertop, and was bouncing a chilled bottle of fragrant red wine over them in sequence.

Ranko turned her gaze back to the living room, where Kaito and Kage sat on the couch, watching a pop music performance from a popular girl group on Hana's small television. The concert was being broadcast live from an amphitheater in downtown Shibuya. Ranko recognized the venue. She'd slept huddled behind the speakers on the concrete stage one night in October, when a torrential rain had forced her to take shelter under the overhang protecting the audio equipment from the elements. Hoshi sat on the floor at his soon-to-be stepfather's feet, surrounded by his new action figures, seemingly oblivious to all the commotion surrounding him.

"Shit," Yui cursed under her breath, turning off her sister's portable video game device after losing her final life as quickly as she had the previous two. She slipped it back into Mei's new carrying case, returning it to its place hanging off the back of the threadbare green recliner in the living room. She glanced back up at the television as the idol group's song ended. With a gesture toward the screen, she turned her gaze up toward her youngest sister. "Who knows, Ran-chan? Maybe next year, we're all gonna be sittin' here watching **you** up there."

A tinny metallic clatter rang out behind Ranko, coming from the direction of the kitchen. The young singer turned to seek its source, finding Mei dropping to her knees. Mei began to wipe a bit of her lime meringue from the pale green tiled floor with an old shred of yellowing bath towel that had been cut into a size more befitting a dishrag. A broken pie crust lay a few centimeters away, where it had fallen from the counter and landed upside-down.

"Hot chicken!" Ayako yelled as she rescued the last breaded drumstick from the crackling hot oil in her electric frying pan with a pair of long aluminum tongs.

"Mm! Save me a thigh," Hana called back in reply, rushing to respond as she swallowed the mouthful of wine she'd drunk directly from the now-empty bottle owing to it not fitting in any of the glasses arrayed in front of her.

"We **know**, Mama! You **always** want the dark meat," Mei shouted as she rose from the floor, tossing the larger pieces of the graham cracker pie crust into a waiting plastic trash receptacle on the floor next to the butcher's block.

"Hey, Ranko?!" Izumi looked back over her shoulder from the mixer, urgency in her eyes. "Where the heck's my butter?!"

Crap, Ranko thought, stirring from her looking down at the butter dish still in her

hand. Despite having been caught slacking in her responsibility, she couldn't help but linger in place for one last moment to soak in the scene.

It's absolute chaos, Ranko mused as she watched her benefactors finalize their preparations. *It's a disorganized, wild, weird-ass mess from one end to the other. This whole thing has absolutely no business working.*

She beamed brightly, watching as Ayako scolded Mei for pilfering a steamed pod of edamame with her fingers.

But it does.

Hana whizzed past her youngest charge, beginning to distribute wine glasses around the long table. Ranko heard her say something in the periphery of her consciousness, probably calling Yui and the boys to the table, but paid it no mind. She watched, almost enthralled, as Ayako, Mei and Izumi laughed together in the kitchen, with Ayako wagging a long pod of edamame in Mei's face as if scolding a misbehaving puppy.

*They all come from different places. Different backgrounds. And yet... it works, for no other reason than because they decided to **make** it work. I guess at the end of the day, that's all it really takes.* Ranko looked up, a giddy smile still lingering on her cheeks as she felt a hand rest on her shoulder and sought its source.

"Hey, little sis. You gonna come sit down, or what?" Yui asked, gently rumpling the shorter girl's wavy red hair with her hand.

"Not yet, she isn't!" Izumi shouted back. "I still need my damn **butter!**"

They are a family, Ranko asserted in her mind, blushing at her flightiness as she hurried back into the kitchen to deliver the butter dish. *Crazy. Mismatched. Strange.*

And absolutely perfect.

The loud whir of the stand mixer ended, and Izumi pulled the stainless steel bowl from its turntable with a clatter. She tapped each of the two beaters on its rim a few times to free the last few gobs of potatoes caked within them, the loud metallic *ping* of each strike effectively sounding the dinner bell. Ranko stood transfixed next to the butcher block, watching as Izumi passed her with the bowl, took the seat between her son and fiancé, and handed the bowl to Kaito on her right.

"Ranko! Do you need an engraved invitation? **C'mon**, honey! It's gonna get cold!" Hana waved to the dazed redhead, pushing the empty folding chair to her left out from under the table with her foot.

They are a family, Ranko repeated in her thoughts as she rounded the table, smiling sweetly to Hana and taking her seat.

And I am one of them.

As the sun rose on one of the first days of 1990, the young singer-in-residence of the Phoenix swayed behind the service bar humming an upbeat Japanese pop song. She made quick work of arranging the Collins glasses she extracted from the dishwasher onto the back bar behind her, readying them to be filled with the mojitos and *Dragonfire* cocktails of a Wednesday night service shift. The last week-plus since the Christmas concert had been a blur for her, a whirlwind of family activities, shopping, and work. Her throat was still a little scratchy after spending most of the previous night's New Year's Eve celebration on stage, though the performance had been nowhere near on the scale of the twin Christmas shows that had saved the little dive bar she called home from financial ruin. *Must be the cold weather getting to me*, she thought with a shiver.

Perhaps the biggest reason the days had run together since the Christmas show was that she hadn't seen Akane since the morning after it, and Ranko missed her something terribly. She hadn't even had a chance to give her girlfriend her Christmas gift yet. Ranko had never been anyone's **girlfriend** before - despite all the boys who'd tried to claim her as such since her fateful trip to Jusenkyo - but she was pretty sure it wasn't supposed to feel as lonely as it seemed to. She closed her eyes, remembering the kiss she and Akane had shared in her bed that morning, and her left foot involuntarily kicked off the floor and rose behind her backside as she set about wiping down the bar counter with a light blue rag.

It sucks that she hasn't been able to get back here to see me, Ranko thought, her brow furrowing as she set about scrubbing out the steel sink basin behind the service bar. *I hope I didn't freak her out, and now she's just hiding from me. I guess her dad might have just been running her ragged with holiday stuff too. I wonder if they had a big party again this year. I wonder what she wore. I wonder if anybody there missed me. I wonder if Akane...*

She sighed, shaking the intrusive thoughts from her head. *Thinking that kinda stuff isn't gonna do me any good. Still, I wish I could at least call her. Just to hear her voice, and have her tell me I'm being stupid thinking stuff like this. But, if I call the house, her dad and Kasumi and Pop will know where I am, and... that's the freakin' last thing I need, them making shit weird when I'm finally feeling like I've got a good thing going here.*

Ranko had still not told any of the bar staff about the kiss she and Akane had shared, but from the incessant teasing, she knew that both Yui and Ayako at least expected as much. *Hell, I think Aya thinks we're doing a lot more than kissing, based on her reaction when I freaked out that mall Santa*, she mused with a devious smirk in the dark. *But, I mean, she said, "Ask for something impossible that you really want." Not my fault if Father Christmas hasn't been asked to make a teenager start liking girls before. If you're so magic, figure that shit out, buddy.*

Ranko grinned as she caught a glimpse of herself in the mirrored wall behind the service bar. She wore a burnt orange cable-knit sweater and a long blue denim skirt, her hair dangling over her shoulder in a loose ponytail. The skirt had been a Christmas gift from Mei, and the sweater one from Hana. She had definitely received far more gifts than she had given, but she suspected her new family had used the holiday as an excuse to help her expand her wardrobe and fill in some of the missing sundries in her little upstairs apartment without bruising her pride.

Her morning tasks done, Ranko pushed through the slatted blue door leading into the back rooms of the Phoenix with a spring in her step. She glanced into her adoptive mother's office through the open door, beaming at the framed painting of a phoenix alighting from its perch. *Aya was right, it looks better over the couch*, she thought. She winced slightly at the sight of a pile of opened envelopes on the corner of Hana's cluttered desk. *Crap. Forgot to go get the mail.*

Reaching the prep counter island, she tentatively touched the back of her hand to the Styrofoam to-go cup she'd left on the steel work surface. Finding that it had cooled enough to be only lukewarm, she picked up the cup and took a sip of her tea.

After walking back through the front room of the bar, she pushed through the glass double doors and stepped outside. *Brrr! Shoulda got my coat. It's fucking cold out here!* Ranko lifted the flap of the cast iron mailbox mounted to the red brick wall next to the front door, slipping her slender hand in and extracting a pile of mail. There was the usual stack of ads and a few envelopes - thankfully none stamped with the telltale red ink indicating they were past due bills.

Slipping back through the front door of the bar, Ranko flipped through the envelopes as she walked back to the service bar. She reached under it, pulling out the steel trash can stowed under the counter. *Let's see. Junk.* She tossed a promotional flyer for a pest control company into the wastebasket atop a few bruised lemons she'd rejected during morning prep. *Junk. Bill. Junk. Junk. Junk. Bill. Bi... wait, what the...?*

The second-to-last envelope had caught her eye, because it was addressed to **her**. She didn't recognize the return address.

Who the heck would send mail to me here? Who even knows I'm here? Collecting a paring knife from the aluminum tray behind the main bar, she slit the envelope open, dumping its contents onto the wooden bartop. There was a sheet of paper with some sort of rigid card folded inside. She carefully unfolded the paper, and as she caught a glimpse of the card within, her breath caught in her throat.

Stuck to the center of the paper with a little glue dot was a provisional Tokyo Metropolis government identification card featuring her photograph, wearing the blue blazer and ivory blouse she'd borrowed from Izumi the day Hana took her to the library. It listed her address as that of the bar, and the correct birthdate - November 25, 1971 - but that was of little consequence. The card listed her name as *Ranko Tendo*, and her sex as *female*.

Her legs buckled.

For several long moments, she remained on her knees behind the bar counter, staring at the little card and trying to wrap her mind around how earth-shatteringly significant the little piece of plastic truly was.

I'm... a woman. Legally. Officially. My name is Ranko Tendo. I... live here. She looked around at her surroundings, though she could see little but the ceiling and the edges of the counter from her knees. *It's... it's not a lie anymore. It's not an act. It's just... me.*

I don't have to feel like a fraud or a pervert if I use my name or wear a dress. I'm a girl. A real one.

Ranma Saotome is dead, she thought with a grin as she glanced down at the silver dragon coiled around her left wrist, concealing the scar left by her masculine form's mortal wound. *For good.*

My name is Ranko Tendo. I have a home. I have a family.

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

I exist.

She rocked back on the balls of her feet and propelled herself up to a standing position. Leaving the knife and the empty envelope sitting on the counter, she darted through the saloon door, her puffy white boots making nearly no sound as she hurried to the stairwell. Ranko ran upstairs to fetch her little purse, slipping the card into a small credit card pocket inside and closing the bag securely. She clutched the bag to herself with an exhilarated smile, squeezing it tight against her chest. *Now, it's safe,* she thought. *Now, I'm safe.*

Ever since she'd abandoned her former identity, she had felt, for all intents and purposes, like a ghost. A non-person. Every time she so much as introduced herself to someone or was announced as she came on stage, she was adopting a persona, putting on a mask to hide the fact that the person underneath it no longer existed. She'd been constantly forced to dredge up the whole story, remember all the pain and hardship, and weave another layer into the incredibly elaborate falsehood that was her life. She felt a pang of guilt and shame every time someone addressed her by name. But now? No guilt. No questions. No stares. No pity. Just **normalcy**.

Now, it was real. **She was just a girl.** Less than four months prior, the thought had been enough to drive her to the brink of self-harm. But, at that moment, Ranko couldn't have wished for anything else. Ranko Tendo was no longer the stage name she used in the constant performance she'd been living for months. Now, it was just... **her**. An identity of her own making.

And no one can ever take it from me, she thought with a victorious grin as she flopped onto her as-yet-unmade twin bed with a happy sigh.

Ranko laid on her bed for a moment, allowing herself to daydream. *I'm a Tendo.*

Just like Akane. I mean, it's gonna be weird when I introduce people to my girlfriend and she has the same last name as me, but Tendo's a fairly common name, so it should be okay. I mean, it's not like me and her can ever get married or anything, since we're both girls, but... She kicked her feet in excitement, her fur-lined ankles still dangling off the edge of her mattress. *I'm so glad I panicked and picked that name when Hana asked me. It's like a promise I made to Akane, that I wanna be a part of her life. Now, it'll feel like me and Akane are...* She giggled at the thought.

*I've gotta get out of here and do something, she thought excitedly. Show somebody. Mama and the girls will never know what a big deal this is for me; to them, they think I just lost my identification card when my purse got stolen or something. I don't give a damn if it's buying a subway pass, or a sub sandwich, for that matter. I just want an excuse to give somebody, **anybody**, my name and not feel like it's something I stole.*

Ranko bounced to her feet, looking herself over in the full-length mirror mounted to the back of her open closet door. *Looks like a girl to me*, she resolved with a million-watt smile as she shot her reflection a knowing wink and scooped her purse back up off of the bed. She ran down the steps, strapping her bag across her body and slipping her white peacoat on as she descended.

Better not make anybody worry, she thought, ducking behind the service bar for one of the yellow notepads she used to record drink orders. On it, she scribbled a note in hurried, informal script:

Went out for a bit. Back in time for opening.

The teen hesitated, a grin cracking her cheeks again as she eyed the somewhat sloppy note. Picking the ballpoint pen up again, she finished the note in slower, deliberate strokes, putting more effort into making her penmanship look as neat and feminine as possible.

Love, Ranko ♡

Leaving the pad on the end of the bar counter where Yui normally dropped her purse upon arrival to work, she slipped out between the glass double doors. Her smile widened even more as she locked the doors behind her with her key. *Of course I have a key. It's my home. Even the government says so.* Shouldering her purse again after returning her key ring to it, she practically skipped her way onto the sidewalk before choosing a direction at random and starting to walk.

A few blocks to the east of the Phoenix, she found a little coffee cart near the harbor. The line wasn't too long, and the smell emanating from it was warm and welcoming. Ranko rarely shopped there - the prices were a bit high for her usual budget. *It's a special occasion*, she thought. She strode confidently up to the counter, and after the elderly woman in front of her had finished requesting a green tea, Ranko placed an order for a small cappuccino.

Four minutes later, when the barista called out, **"Order for Ranko!"** she rocketed to her feet from a weathered wooden bench overlooking the water and waved enthusiastically. **"That's ME!"**

And, for the first time, it really was.

She strolled down the street, back in the direction of the bar, letting the hot liquid in the Styrofoam cup in her hand cool for a few minutes before daring to sip at it. *Can't get too crazy*, she thought. *I might be Ranko forever, but the Cat's Tongue is still definitely a thing. And besides...*

The teenager chuckled to herself, thinking back to the fateful event that had begun her journey into womanhood, years ago. In her mind, Ranko inverted the circumstances that had changed her life, almost hearing it in the heavy Chinese accent of the guide assigned to the Cursed Spring of Jusenkyo. *You have a very tragic curse. Hot water will turn you into a boy. Don't worry, though! Cold water will change you right back!* Now, the shapely redheaded girl with the singing voice everybody loved? That Akane thought was **cute**? That had a mother and four sisters who loved her? **That** was her true form. Even the government of Tokyo said so, and the proof was in her purse.

She scanned the businesses on the street as she walked, looking for any further opportunity to introduce herself. *Discount store? No, nobody there would ask for my name. Hardware store?* Ranko paused for a moment, shaking her head and continuing to walk. *I mean, Goji in there knows my name, but... I dunno. I don't like the way he looks at me when I go in there by myself. Gives me the mad Kuno vibes.*

Ranko chuckled as her eyes fell on the dojo she'd fought at on the day she met Hana. The day her life as she knew it truly began. *Man, good thing that guy kicked my ass and made me look for a different job*, she thought with a quiet scoff. *Most grateful I've ever been for a black eye. Well, maybe second-most, after the first time Akane met me and clobbered me with her dad's dining room table.*

She thought back to Sensei Fukui's mocking dismissal, after the Cat's Tongue had brought her to her knees. The brutish martial arts master had suggested she join his intermediate girls' class, and for a split second, she considered doing it, just so she could write her true name on the application form.

I still can't believe that clown beat me, she fumed as she passed the frosted glass storefront of the kempo dojo. *I mean, I wasn't exactly at my best, I guess. Hadn't slept or eaten worth a damn in nearly a week. Still, though. Before the Cat's Tongue, I'd have eaten that dude for breakfast.* Ranko shook her head as she recalled the encounter. *What a fucking idiot. All I wanted was a job, and that dipshit thought I was challenging his fucking dojo.*

She cringed, remembering all the sensei's young students laughing at her as she retreated. *It felt just like the match with...* Ranko shook her head hard, as if trying to forcibly eject the intrusive thoughts from her mind. She looked down at her reflection in the glass of a newspaper vending machine, taking a moment to mentally steady herself. *Nice try, Mikado. Not even **you** can fuck up this day for me. Not today.*

Ranko took a few more steps, wondering if the nail salon next door to the dojo would ask for her name if she walked in. *I mean, I guess I could use a fresh paint job*, she mused, glancing down at her fingernails. *The glitter stuff Izzi used for Christmas didn't hold up as well as the professional shit they used at the mall. Oh,*

what the hell. I get paid on Friday, and I can eat bar food for a couple days until then.

Her hand was still on the door handle, and the smell of the acetone on the air in the little beauty parlor had only just begun accosting her nostrils, when Ranko froze suddenly. Her jaw fell slack, a thunderstruck expression in her ice-blue eyes. *Oh my fucking gods! That... that's it! Well, part of it, anyway!* She gasped and turned, tossing away her half-full beverage in the tiny trash can just inside the door of the salon.

“Hey, wait! Come back! We’re having a sale!” a middle-aged stylist called after her, but Ranko was already halfway across the street before the woman’s words reached her ears.

She rushed down the sidewalk, her hands shaking as she fumbled in her bag for her keys at the front door of the Phoenix. *How the fuck didn’t I think of it before?! Stupid, Ranko! Stupid!* Crashing through the pair of doors, the young redhead tossed her purse on the small wooden podium that served as the bar’s hostess stand. Her mind raced as she began pacing circles in the empty barroom as fast as her legs would carry her.

Holy fucking shit. If we can do this, Ranko thought hopefully, maybe me and Akane can be together after all! Well, it’s one problem down out of about a thousand, anyway, but it’s a start!

Again, her eyes fell on her reflection in the mirror behind the service bar. She sighed, willing her heart to stop pounding as she pulled the white elastic from her ponytail and ran her fingers through her hair. She clenched her hands into fists, pulling her hair with a groan until the tension on her ever-sensitive scalp became too much to bear.

“Come on, now, think, Ranko!” she mumbled as she frantically searched her own eyes for answers in the mirror.

*“How in the actual fuck are we gonna pull **this one** off?!”*

Ranko sat alone on the Tokyo commuter train, her leg bouncing on the floor with nervous energy. The rhythmic clattering of the train on the tracks rattled in her ears like a ticking clock counting down to some dark fate. Everyone had told her not to stress about the events of the day, but she couldn't help it.

So much is riding on this. If I screw it up, I'll embarrass Mama. I'll... hell, I don't know what the heck she's gonna make me do even if it goes well. But, I gotta do my best. Somehow.

A shrill series of tones pierced her thoughts, followed by a robotic, monotone voice. "Arriving, Hiro-o Station."

The commuter train hissed to a stop, and the redhead stood, picking up her white peacoat from the seat next to hers and slipping it on over her blue tee shirt. She'd paired it with her black jeans and black heeled boots. It was unseasonably warm that Friday afternoon, and Ranko was glad of it; after the frigid December, she thought it might take until May to get the chill out of her bones. Part of her had wanted to dress up for the occasion, to make as good an impression as possible and hopefully balance out the disdain she expected to receive as soon as she walked in the door. Ultimately, she'd decided that if she was going to go into battle, she needed a little bit of armor, and fidgeting with her uncomfortable clothing would only have made things worse.

Slipping the strap of her black leather purse over her torso and stepping off of the train onto the platform, Ranko looked around with a resigned sigh. The thick heels of her boots made a metallic rattling sound as she strode across the steel grating of the station floor, the noise giving way to a rhythmic clacking when she stepped outside the station and onto the sidewalk. Ranko winced, shielding her eyes as she emerged from the subterranean transport hub into the mid-afternoon sun. *Man, I gotta get some shades*, she thought as she blinked the sunspots from her eyes. She remembered the heart-shaped pink sunglasses she had back in her little studio apartment, though she'd never thought to wear them other than onstage. *I mean, I guess they're cute*, the redhead mused as she scanned her surroundings to get her bearings.

Her foot tapped the asphalt with nervous energy as she waited for the signal to enter the crosswalk. When the light indicated it was safe to cross, she scurried across the busy street and into a wide expanse of grass. It was one of the largest green spaces in the Minato district, and there was a peaceful air about it that permeated Ranko's anxiety, if only a little. She hummed to herself as she rounded one of the winding bridge trails that made their way across Imperial Pond, smirking to herself as she spied a brilliant blue kingfisher perched on one of the bamboo poles jutting upward from the surface of the murky water. *In another life, another day, I'd have jumped across those just to prove I could*, she thought with a chuckle and a shake of her head. *And today, I'm just worried it would mess up my hair if I fell*

in. I guess a lot of things are different than they used to be these days.

Ranko smiled, watching a young couple playing fetch with a small, shaggy dog in a clearing as she passed along a path of weather-worn red cobblestone. *I should've come here more often when I was homeless. There's a serenity about this place I could have used back then.* Indeed, her heart rate felt almost normal for the first time all day. Checking a pillar-shaped signpost to confirm she was heading the right way, she took the left path at a fork and continued her stroll through the park. A quick glance at a wrought-iron clock on a tall black pole informed her that she needed to pick up the pace, however. *Last thing I need is to be late because I stopped to smell the flowers.*

The nervous teen emerged from the treeline into a large clearing at the back of the park, making her way toward the white five-story building nestled into it. She passed between two white, square columns, pausing for a moment to steel her nerves before stepping close enough to the glass double doors to trigger the motion sensor that slid them open and admitted her. Inhaling sharply through her teeth, Ranko winced at the echoing sound her heels made on the white tile floor in the cavernous, and eerily quiet, main room. Several people turned in their study cubicles to look at her, and she blushed awkwardly at the realization that she was being watched.

Her attention snapped forward again at the sound of the young man at the circular oak desk greeting her. "Hello, welcome to the Tokyo Metropolitan Library. How can we help you?" He looked up from the novel he was reading, taking a moment to remember he was supposed to smile despite his annoyance being interrupted during an action scene.

Ranko swallowed hard as she addressed the collegian in the white shirt and thin blue tie behind the desk. "Uh, hello. My name is Ranko Tendo, and I'm here for the high school equivalency placement exam?" She fumbled around in her little black bag, producing her new identification card and a slip of green paper indicating that she was registered for the test.

"Ah, of course. You want the second floor," he said, pointing with an open hand to the steel door behind him. "The exam is being administered in a study room just to the right of the elevator. It's room two-fourteen. **Good luck!**"

Ranko thanked the receptionist, waving as she made her way around the desk. Her face warmed a bit at the realization that his eyes were lingering on her backside as she walked to the left side of the lobby. She pressed the backlit button on the wall to summon the elevator, and by her estimation, it must have taken a week and a half for it to descend from the third floor and open its doors with a little **ding**. She stepped in, pressing the button for the second floor and leaning against the back wall of the metal cube as it ferried her to her destination.

When the elevator opened with another merry chime, Ranko immediately spied the open door of the study room. Several other people were milling into the room, all of them wearing similarly nervous expressions. Ranko was the youngest of them by at least fifteen years. She sighed, a sense of shame welling within her.

Look at all these people, losers like me who never managed to get through school.

But, I guess I'm lucky; if Mama didn't push me to do this, I'd probably end up having to do it for some reason or other when I was way older. She allowed herself a soft smile. She's always lookin' out for me. 'Cause I'm her daughter, Ranko recalled, her grin widening at the memory of her first meeting at the library.

With a nervous wave to the proctor sitting at the large aluminum desk facing an array of smaller ones, Ranko slipped into the room. She slid her backside into one of the empty plastic chairs near the front of the room, behind a small pressboard desk on which rested a thick packet of paper and a green strip of cardstock lined with hundreds of little printed circles. Two sharpened pencils rested to the right of it. *Whew. Okay, Ranko. Here we go. I can do this.*

The severe-looking woman at the desk at the front of the room stood, adjusting her thick-rimmed glasses. "Okay, I think that's everyone, so I think we can get started. Would someone get the door, please?" She nodded her thanks as a middle-aged man in denim overalls stood and walked to the door to close it. "So, welcome. You will have two hours to complete the test. Remember to fill in the bubbles on your form completely and carefully with your answers, or the machine won't be able to read them properly. There's no penalty to your score for getting a question wrong, so if you're not sure of something, take your best guess. When you're finished, put your form in the slot here, and you can head out quietly, so as not to disrupt the others. Good luck." She pressed a button on the black box on the desk, and a series of red digits appeared on its face, ticking from 2:00:00 down to 1:59:59.

Ranko picked up a pencil, looking over the Scantron form. She found the blank for her name, carefully writing out the hiragana to spell out Ranko Tendo. She took her time with this; she was still quite proud that the name was truly hers, and she wanted it to look nice. Despite her best efforts however, the lines were uneven and shaky, and she cursed her terrible penmanship under her breath. *I gotta work on that. Girls are supposed to have pretty handwriting. My chicken scratch is a dead giveaway that I used to be a dude.*

She glanced up at the clock, seeing that two minutes had elapsed, and only her name was filled in. The nervous teen chuckled grimly to herself. *Hey, at least I know I got one question right, and that one would've been wrong until last week, too. So, progress, I guess?* Ranko used the end of her pencil to break the sticker sealing the test packet and opened it, tucking a stray strand of flame-red hair behind her ear. *Okay, Ranko, let's do this,* she thought to herself with a heavy sigh of determination.

The first section of the test focused on basic arithmetic, and Ranko flew through it with ease, filling in the little circles on her form quickly. *If the whole test is this easy, all my worries were for nothing,* she thought with a confident snicker. By the time she reached the fourth page, however, most of the numbers in the math problems had been replaced with romaji letters and Greek symbols. *Weeeeeell, shit. So much for that.* She closed her eyes, straining to remember the few times Akane had tried to help with her algebra homework. Bouncing her toes nervously on the floor, she worked the problems as best she could and bubbled in answers on her sheet, but she was far less confident in her responses.

Furrowing her brow, Ranko held her breath as she turned the page, hoping to move

on to history or language arts. Instead, the spread of pages was covered with pictures of triangles and parabolas on graphs, and something about *limits* and *derivatives*, whatever those were. To the bewildered teenager, the problems might as well have been written in cuneiform. She stared at the graphs in horror for several long moments before stealing a glance up at the clock. Almost thirty minutes had elapsed, and there were still dozens of pages to go in her test packet. She had no idea where to even begin with the geometry and calculus problems, so she bubbled in the third answer for all fifteen questions. *Maybe I'll get lucky on a few of them*, she hoped.

Turning the page, she was relieved to find questions that were written in words she actually understood. The history section began much as the math section did, with questions she considered fairly easy. What cities the Americans bombed in World War II, the Meiji period and the fall of the daimyos, what year Emperor Hirohito took power, ***no problem!*** Then the questions began to delve into the details of the Manchurian incident, the Battle of Namdaemun, and the Yoshida Doctrine, and again she found herself lost and filling in random bubbles on her sheet.

The Japanese language section wasn't too challenging for her; there were a few kanji she didn't recognize, but otherwise, she felt confident in most of her answers and she breezed through it in a matter of a few minutes. Tapping her pencil eraser on the desktop, she looked up to check the clock. *One hour to go*. Thumbing through the corners of the pages to count the remaining pages of her test packet, Ranko emitted a small sigh of relief. *Doing okay, I think*.

She turned to the next page, and found herself staring at the start of the English section. *Well, fuck. This is what landed me here in the first place*. She grimaced, remembered the trio of Americans that had been so rude to her in the bar that night, and glowered at the page. *No way you jerks are gonna beat me*, she thought to herself as she readied her pencil. *I'm gonna figure this shit out, and then assholes like you aren't ever gonna get to laugh at me again*. With all the confidence of ignorance, she dove into the questions. She actually felt comfortable with some of the vocabulary, but the sentence structure and more advanced words eluded her. *In fairness, they tend not to teach words like **tequila** in high school English class anyway*, she thought with a smirk.

With twenty minutes to go, she delved into the final section of the test: science. The first few questions dealt with biology subjects, and of the questions she could answer, nearly all of the requisite knowledge had come primarily from her martial arts training. She cringed when a question asked her the number of bones in the human body, remembering that she quoted the figure to Mikado before beating him half to death behind the Phoenix just before Christmas. On the next page, she was prompted for the chemical symbols for several elements on the periodic table, the formula for water, and so forth.

She turned to the last page and groaned. *The fuck?! More math?! This isn't fair!* The differential equations of the chemistry section, and the laws and theorems of the physics portion, loomed up at her from the page. Ranko scratched her temple with the eraser end of her pencil as she read a question asking her to calculate the volume of a mole of hydrogen. *Huh. I thought all animals were carbon-based, even*

moles. *Whatever. Science is for nerds*, she thought. *Mei would probably be fine.* The next problem described a ball being thrown out of a fifth-story window, and asked how long it would fall. Ranko was grateful the question was multiple-choice, because she likely would have written *“until it hits the ground”* otherwise.

Ranko checked the clock again as she closed the test packet. *Four minutes to spare. Holy fuck.* She sighed, looking over the little graphite dots all over her paper. *I could try to go back over my answers, I guess, but let’s be real: it ain’t gonna get any better, and I’m just gonna second-guess shit.* With a quiet sigh of resignation, she stood, dropping the slip into the slot at the top of the dark-stained wooden box on the corner of the proctor’s desk. She offered a slight bow to the exam proctor and exited the room, the clacking of her heels momentarily drawing the attention of the few remaining people still taking the test.

She quickly exited the library, taking a few deep breaths once she emerged into the open air of the park to try and calm herself. *Whatever’s gonna happen is gonna happen, I guess. There’s no changing it now. However it goes, I’ll deal with what comes next, and I’ll have help if I need it.*

The young redhead sighed, beginning her walk back through the park toward the train station. Her cheeks warmed at the sight of a blonde girl, maybe three years her junior, walking a dachshund on a leash in a high school pinafore in red and white. *Could Mama... really try to make me go back to school? As a **girl**?! I mean, that’s what made me haul ass from Akane’s place in the first place! Would they even let me, or am I too old? Would I have to go to an all-girls’ school, or am I gonna have to deal with... **boys**?* She swallowed hard, looking down at her feet. *I’ve got enough wandering eyes, and wandering hands, to deal with at work as it is.*

Ranko watched the high schooler with the dog meet up with a tall boy with shaggy black hair, letting a thin smile crack her lips as he wrapped his arms around her. *I wonder what Akane would think of me having to go back to school. Wearing a girl’s uniform like that. Would she find it cute, or is she more likely to just laugh at me? Especially since next year, she’ll be off to college, and I... won’t.*

She shook her head vigorously, trying to dislodge the intrusive thoughts from her mind as she emerged from the park onto the sidewalk. The light at the crosswalk was already illuminated, so Ranko quickened her step to make it before the cycle changed. *No use worrying about it now. We’ll figure it out when it happens, and besides... I have something more important to think about right now.*

Ranko bounded down the stairs to enter the subway station, anticipation bringing a lightness to her heart and a smile to her lips. *Let’s see... which one to Shibuya... ah!* She hurried through the crowd of commuters, only stopping at the sight of a young boy sitting on a wooden bench with a white bucket at his feet. Digging quickly in her purse, she produced a few hundred yen in small bills for the boy. A few moments later, she boarded the train for the shopping district, beaming down at the single long-stemmed white rose in her hand.

I’m finally gonna get to see Akane tonight, she thought, grinning wide as her nostrils filled with the sweet scent of the flower she clutched to her chest.

*I have to look fucking **perfect**.*

Akane grabbed the brass handle, pulling open the heavy glass front door of the Phoenix to the sound of thundering applause. Under her breath, she cursed her calculus teacher for holding her late after class and making her miss the first hour of Ranko's performance. She hadn't even taken the time to go home and change clothes, so she was still in her blue and white school uniform. Akane wished she'd thought to bring a change of clothes, as she worried that her Furinkan pinafore reminded Ranko too much of the life she'd left behind. She'd promised Ranko - by way of a message delivered via Nabiki the day before - that she'd be there, though, and keeping her word had been the most important thing. She didn't want her new girlfriend to think that she'd been stood up.

*My girlfriend. Holy shit. I have a fucking **girlfriend**,* Akane thought, her cheeks flushing hotter than the flaming *Dragonfire* cocktail Mei carried past her with a wave and a smile. The flustered high schooler was barely coherent enough to return the gesture. *Does that mean I'm... **gay**? I mean, I don't like girls. Not like **that**. It's not like she and I have... Somehow, her face warmed further still. I don't think I could ever do **that** with a girl. I've never even done anything like that with a **boy**! Never really wanted to either, though. Wait, does that mean...? Shit.*

She shook her head vigorously, almost launching her teal headband across the barroom. *I don't like girls! I just really like **that one**! And, I mean, Ranko's definitely not like other girls. She's... special. She was a boy when I met her, and...*

Akane swallowed hard as her mind filled with memories. *No. No she wasn't. When she and her father came to the house that first time, she was a girl, and pretty much the first thing I did with her **girl** side was see her naked. And when I did... The high schooler leaned to her left, gripping the hostess podium while she waited for a path to clear to the bar. *Whoa. Feeling a little lightheaded all of a sudden.**

Man, Dad's gonna be so pissed, if he ever finds out about us. She snickered to herself as she started to push through the crowd. *It's not like he has a right to be, though. You wanted me to end up with Ranma, right, Dad?* Akane turned her eyes up to the new wooden stage that dominated the back wall of the Phoenix, her eyes drinking in the sight of its occupant captivating the Friday night capacity crowd with an energetic pop cover and the dance moves to match.

I'm doing exactly what you asked, Daddy, Akane resolved with a self-amused grin. *I'm being a good girl. I'm just doing it... my way.*

Ranko was wearing a baby pink ankle-length dress with short sleeves and a thin red vinyl belt, and her hair was tied up in a loose ponytail with a matching pink ribbon. Her ever-present silver dragon bracelet reflected the stage lighting as she danced. Whereas she had usually carried herself with a sort of quiet resignation at the thought of feminine attire in Akane's memories, that night, she seemed to revel in it. Every move of her hips and every kick of her legs seemed calculated to maximize

the swish of the puffy tulle skirt around her body. She looked every bit the part of the babydoll idols in the popular girl groups, all the way down to the smile that was *almost* too radiant to be authentic.

Akane chuckled. *Sheesh, Ranko. Call you cute one time, and look at you. I've been a girl my whole life, and I don't have anything half that frilly and girly in my closet. You always were one to take everything as a challenge and do it all the way, though, so I guess I shouldn't be surprised.* She finally made her way to the main bar counter, giving a nod of acknowledgement to the tall, lanky blonde behind it.

Yui gave her a welcoming wave and started pouring her a soda. "Hey there, Akane! Seems like you're becoming something of a regular here." She glanced up at the stage. "Can't imagine **why**." Snickering, Yui slid the Collins glass across the lacquered countertop to her sister's guest.

The teen blushed deeply, hiding her face behind her soda glass under the guise of drinking from it. "It's not like **that!**"

"*Uh-huh,*" Yui replied sarcastically, rolling her eyes with a knowing smirk as she turned to a different spot at the bar to take another order.

Akane groaned, shouting after the bartender. "**Hey!** It's **not!**"

Behind the service bar, Izumi finished dropping a few glasses in the dishwasher and grinned deviously up at Akane. While maintaining eye contact with her, she spoke, but not to her. "Yui, did you **see** Ranko today?! I couldn't **believe** it! How many times have I tried to drag her shopping? She always comes up with some excuse why she doesn't wanna go. But, today, she just **had** to go out by herself and get a new dress special for tonight. Any idea what the occasion is?"

Almost on cue, Mei pushed through the saloon doors, her long blue pigtails bobbing out from under the large mushroom pizza she carried over her head. Even with the aluminum pan raised as high as she could reach, the diminutive server had to be careful not to hit any of her taller companions with it. "I mean, Ranko's working tonight, so she couldn't **possibly** have a **date...**" She flashed Akane a devilish wink from under the pizza pan.

Akane's face was warm enough to light a campfire. *How do they all know? Did Ranko tell them? She said she wasn't gonna!* She looked around the room, frantically searching for help she did not find. "Aww, **come on,** you guys! *Ummm...*"

Yui smiled, taking Akane's poorly-concealed nervous reaction as confirmation. "For whatever it's worth, you have our blessing, not that you **needed** it. Or, seemingly, *waited* for it."

Mei nodded along with her sister. "Just don't hurt her. Ranko's been through too much already, and I suspect we don't know the half of it."

On that point, Akane could not argue. She stammered, looking to the three girls for some sort of clue as to how they all knew what she and Ranko had agreed to keep secret.

Seeming to sense the question in her mind, Izumi walked up behind her from the direction of the service bar and put her arm around Akane's shoulders. "Don't worry. She didn't spill the beans. Not directly, anyway." She glanced over at her fellow waitress with a smile. Ranko had descended from the stage and was taking an order at a six-top table near the back of the bar. "But she's been walking on clouds since the last time you were here. It didn't exactly take a rocket surgeon to figure it out."

Akane blushed deeper still - *somehow* - but smiled happily. *They all know she's with another girl... and they're okay with it? Hell, they seem to be reacting to it better than most people did when they found out I was engaged to a guy.* But, more importantly, she hoped that Izumi was right, and that the idea of being with Akane was at least part of what was making Ranko so happy.

After a few more moments of light-hearted ribbing from the trio, Akane heard a familiar voice over her shoulder.

"Hey, Mei, can I get a basket of chicken wings for table eigh..." The redheaded waitress blinked as she rounded a bulky man seated at the bar and caught sight of her partner. "A- Akane! **You made it!**"

Akane spun around with a beaming smile. "Hey, **you!** Sorry I was late! I got held up at school."

The redhead shook her head. "Don't worry about it. I'm glad you're here! Yui, do you mind if I..."

The bartender rolled her eyes with mock indignation, but smiled. "Alright, alright, but only 'cause you've been singing your ass off for an hour. Go on, go take a break. We got this."

Waving her thanks, Ranko pushed through the saloon door into the back room, Akane in tow. The pair excitedly headed up the stairs to Ranko's little apartment. Ranko closed the door behind them, and as soon as she turned her back to it, Akane's arms were around her.

Akane could feel the smaller girl relax her muscles and melt into the embrace, as if Ranko had been holding her breath waiting for the hug for far too long. "Look at **you!**" Akane smiled. "You look like a freaking **princess!**"

Ranko blushed a shade as red as her vinyl belt. "Do you like it?" *She said she wanted me to be cute. I'm so glad I didn't disappoint her. I've disappointed her so much already, and I don't know how many more chances I'm gonna get. I mean, she's not acting like she's holding any of the old stuff against me, but I'm not in a hurry to find out if she is. Especially not when things are going so good.*

While running the backs of her fingers gently over Ranko's cheek, Akane bobbed her head in confirmation. "I **do!** Was all this for me?"

Ranko nodded, panic washing over her face. She wasn't sure if the shudder running down the whole of her body was a physical response to Akane's whisper-soft touch on her ever-sensitive skin, or just her nerves. "Is it too much? It **is**, isn't it? Fuck, I'm **sorry**. I don't know how to..."

Akane leaned forward, silencing her stammering girlfriend with a quick peck on her lips. "It's not too much. It's **perfect**. You don't have to be so nervous, ya know."

Again, the redhead nodded meekly. "I know, and... I'm trying. *I just...*"

Offering the trepidatious teen a reassuring smile, Akane sat gently on the foot of the immaculately-made bed. "You just, **what?** Talk to me, Ranko."

The redhead walked closer to the bed, standing in front of Akane and reaching down for both of the taller girl's hands with both of her own. "I don't know how to be anybody's girlfriend. Like, I know what **guys** like - not that I'm trying to get guys to like me or nothin' - but you're not a **guy**. And I just... I feel like I'm getting a second chance with you that I didn't especially deserve, and I don't want to mess it up. You're taking a huge chance on me, and I don't ever wanna do anything to make you regret it."

Akane chuckled, rolling her eyes with an amused grin. "Is **that** what this is about?" Receiving a sheepish nod in reply, Akane squeezed the smaller girl's hands tightly. "You don't have to impress me. All I ever expect you to be is yourself, even if you're still figuring out who that is, with everything being so... *different...* for you now. I really hope you know that."

Ranko blushed, the nervousness in her face shrinking to make way for an excited smile. "**Speaking of being myself...**" She squeezed Akane's hands once, wordlessly asking Akane to let them go. Once her hands were freed, Ranko flitted over to the dinette table, a skip in her step.

What the heck got into her all of a sudden? Akane covered her mouth with her hand, but failed to stifle her giggles at the way Ranko moved in the puffy pink dress. *She looks like a ballerina had way too much coffee.*

Having retrieved her black leather purse from the dinette table, Ranko hurried back to the bed and plopped down on the edge of the mattress next to Akane. The tulle of her skirt made a quiet *crunch* sound as it settled around her legs. After fumbling with the rose-shaped clasp for a moment, Ranko opened the bag and produced her new identification card from one of the thin organizer slots. She stuffed it into Akane's hands, bouncing on the mattress with glee. "Look! Look! It's **official!**"

Akane looked it over, taking a moment to absorb what she was seeing. The finality of the Ranma she once knew being gone forever hadn't fully hit home with her, and a part of her felt like she was looking at his death certificate. *Wow. She's really going through with this.* With a quiet sigh, Akane shook the momentary pang of grief from her mind. *There's no reason to be sad. Everything I liked about Ranma is still here, and so much of the stuff I didn't like has been replaced with things I like. With things I really like. Besides, even if it's hard for me, I can't let her see it. She's worked hard for this, and she deserves her moment to celebrate it.*

“Look at that!” Akane put on a wide smile, rolling her eyes mockingly. “Of freakin’ **course** you managed to get a cute ID photo. **Nobody** gets those. You lucky little shit.”

The ebullient redhead giggled, shrugging her shoulders. “Hey, don’t look at me. I had almost nothin’ to do with it. Izzi picked the outfit and everything. All I did was sit there and smile pretty.” Ranko winced slightly at the sight of herself in the blue blazer and ivory blouse, recalling that the photo had been taken the day she’d signed up for the placement exam she’d sat for earlier that afternoon. *I still can’t believe I had to do that, and Mama might be trying to make me go back to school. I’m embarrassed it’s even a conversation. And honestly, I’m pretty sure I bombed it and I’m gonna end up in primary school next to fuckin’ Hoshi.* Her blue eyes met Akane’s brown, and the intrusive thoughts faded from her mind. *Tonight, I don’t care, she resolved. That’s Future Ranko’s problem.*

“Yeah, well, you got the *pretty* part nailed,” Akane said, grinning at the way her girlfriend’s cheeks reddened at her words. Tilting the card to better catch the light from the little lamp on Ranko’s nightstand, Akane looked it over some more. “So... **Miss Tendo**, huh?”

Akane did not think she’d ever seen a smile as big as the one that formed on Ranko’s face as the smaller girl nodded hard enough to jostle her beribboned ponytail over her shoulder. Giggling, Akane handed the card back to Ranko, her hand lingering for a moment atop Ranko’s with the card between their palms. “But I haven’t even **proposed**.”

Ranko’s face turned an even brighter shade of crimson. *Oh, gods! Proposing? But we’re both girls! We couldn’t possibly! It’s not even legal! Besides... if she were the one that proposed, would that make me the... the... bride?! She rocked back on the bed, her mind flooding with memories of Izumi warning her about one day shopping for wedding dresses. I couldn’t! No way! That’s... like, I’m a girl now, but that’s a whole-ass ‘nother level! I’d fuckin’ never pull that shit off!*

Sighing, she looked down at Akane’s hand laying atop hers. Even with the card between their hands, Ranko could feel the warmth of Akane’s palm in her own. The Cat’s Tongue amplified every nerve - every cold breeze, every rough texture - but something about Akane’s touch stimulated it in a way nothing else ever had. It felt as if every cell of her skin were somehow *reaching out* to Akane, wordlessly pleading for more of her touch wherever it could be had.

But if she ever asked me, Ranko thought, I’d like to think I’d find a way to try anyway.

“I’m really happy for you, Ran-chan... **Ranko**.” Akane gave the redhead’s hand another gentle squeeze. *She’s gone to a lot of trouble to earn this new identity she’s made for herself. The least I can do is give her the respect of saying her name out loud. I bet it’ll feel good to her.* The bright grin and the glistening eyes of the girl sitting on the bed next to Akane told her that she had guessed correctly.

Ranko turned to look behind her, craning her neck in the direction of the little digital alarm clock on her nightstand. “I should get back down there. Remember, the other

girls don't know about... **us.**"

Akane smirked, scoffing quietly. "Uhhhh... I wouldn't be so sure about that."

Frowning, Ranko groaned quietly. "What? **How?! I** didn't tell them, I swear! How would they..."

Akane reached out, fluffing the skirt of her girlfriend's pink dress for emphasis. "I think they **might** have caught on from the way you're behaving, especially around me. It's a good thing you're a better singer than you are an actress."

Ranko looked down at her lap, a slow, disappointed sigh escaping her lips. "I'm really sorry, Akane. I didn't mean to..." She blinked, her voice trailing off as Akane slipped two fingers under her chin and used them to lift her head up until the two young women made eye contact.

"Don't you dare apologize to me for being happy we're together." Akane's face formed into a gentle, easy smile, her eyes sparkling with contentment. "I'm glad that you're as proud to be **my girlfriend** as I am to be **yours.**"



The remainder of the night's service - and Ranko's several subsequent performances - had flown by fairly quickly. Akane set herself up at the small four-top round table in the alcove closest to the stage - the one Yui had taken to calling the *VIP table* - and Ranko made a point to visit her every chance she could between songs and running food and beverages to her other tables. Hana had graciously offered to comp anything Akane wanted to eat or drink, which Ranko greatly appreciated. Asking her girlfriend for money at the end of the night would have been awkward for her.

Akane smiled softly, swaying along with Ranko's final performance of the evening. Last call had been announced, and people were beginning to pay their tabs and filter out of the bar, but the raven-haired teen in the teal Furinkan pinafore was still fixated on the stage. *I don't think she's done a single song tonight that wasn't a love ballad. I wonder if that was for me? Nah. Probably just a coincidence.* She raised her eyes from the swishing dress around Ranko's hips to look deeply into her eyes, and what she saw there warmed her soul. *Or... maybe not?*

When the last customer had departed, Ranko swung by Akane's table, leaning over her shoulder with a gentle touch on Akane's forearm. "Hey, I just need to help them with cleanup for a bit and then we can go hang out. I promise, I'll hurry."

She turned to return to the service bar, but before she could take a step, Izumi waved her off. "We can handle it, Ran-chan. You two go ahead. Good night, Akane. Have **fun.**" She giggled, flitting away to refill another soy sauce bottle.

Ranko blushed at her sister's sing-song tone. *It's one thing that they figured out*

*we're... together, whatever that means, but they don't gotta make it sound like we're doing... well, shit we're not! I don't even know how two girls would **do** that without a...* She buried her face in her hand, feeling the warmth of her cheeks radiating into the skin of her palm. *I guess if I ever really wanna know, I can ask Yui. If nothing else, it'd be hilarious to see the look on her face when her baby sister asks her to explain how gay girls fuck.*

Akane took Ranko's other hand, pulling her out of her amused, and embarrassed, daze. "C'mon, you. Let's get out of here before they change their minds." Ranko smiled in response, and the pair hurried through the blue slatted door and up the stairs to Ranko's studio apartment. They flopped down on the bed next to each other, giggling together.

Rolling onto her side to face Ranko, Akane began idly playing with the pink ribbon adorning Ranko's ponytail. "I can't believe how freaking **cute** you are. It's not even fair!"

The redhead blushed. "You aren't so bad yourself, you know."

Akane scoffed, letting her jaw fall slack in mock offense. "Not bad, huh? **Not bad?!**"

Turning onto her side, Ranko flashed her arm toward Akane at lightning speed, finding purchase on her ribs and tickling her through the coarse fabric of her school pinafore.

The larger girl writhed under the assault, kicking her legs in the air involuntarily. "**Hey! Stop that!**"

Ranko shook her head defiantly, unrelenting in her teasing. "No way. You want me to stop, you're gonna have to **stop me.**" She moved her hands to yet another spot, and another, never slowing for a moment.

Akane flailed to block Ranko's fingers, but the redhead was simply too quick. She flopped limply to the mattress on her back. "Okay! Okay! Mercy! **Mercy!**"

"Nope. You can't stop me!" Ranko rose to her knees, driving her hands down at Akane's ribs again and again. There was an impish mocking in her tone. "**You'll never be fast enough!**"

"Oh?! You don't think so? **I'll show you!**" Akane's voice took on an air of determination, and her hands swung back into motion, swatting at Ranko's wrists as best she could.

Ranko grinned victoriously. *There it is. There's the competitive spirit I was counting on. Come on, Akane. That's it! Fight back!*

Akane flung her arms this way and that, blocking about half of Ranko's attempts to reach her torso with her pinching fingernails. It seemed that the faster she blocked, the faster Ranko's hands moved. She gasped for every breath, laughter purging the air from her lungs as quickly as it could enter them.

Ranko pinched at her partner's bare feet, giving chase as Akane tried to retract them under her skirt. "I thought you were gonna stop me! You aren't **giving up**, are ya, Akane?!" She had a devilish simper about her. *Come on, Akane, take the bait*, she thought to herself. *I've got one chance to make this work.*

Akane's face became one of combative resolve despite the smile still lingering on her lips. "**Never!**" Her adoring assailant's arms darted this way and that, and Akane desperately flailed her hands to keep up. If she wanted to breathe, she had to block. Whatever had gotten into Ranko, she wasn't letting up.

Faster and faster Ranko moved, and faster and faster Akane fought to counter. She reached a point where her hands seemed to decouple from her conscious mind; they moved almost instinctively, sparing the delay between thought and action. She blocked one pinch, then another, then another. Five in a row. Then ten in a row, then twenty. She only focused on her intent; her body did the rest almost entirely on its own.

After what felt like an hour but was closer in reality to ten minutes, Ranko finally fell on her back on the bed, breathing heavily. Akane rose to her knees, looking down at the redhead and beaming with triumphant accomplishment. "**Ha!** I told you I could do it!"

From her back, the exhausted martial artist grinned ecstatically up at her partner, giggling along with her. "You sure did! You got me." *You did it, Akane! Holy shit! This might just have a chance to work!*

Akane reached forward quickly, taking each of Ranko's wrists in her hands and gently pinning them to the mattress on either side of her body with locked elbows. "No, **now** I've got you!" She bent down with a mockingly sinister laugh, planting a soft kiss on the lips of the entrapped redhead as she felt Ranko's body tense beneath her own.

The giggling stopped, and Ranko made no effort to respond to the kiss in any way. It was like she had fallen asleep with her eyes open. Akane pulled back, releasing her quarry's wrists and surveying her face. There was a terror in Ranko's unblinking eyes that Akane couldn't explain. "Ranko?! What's wrong?!" She reached down, rubbing Ranko's arm reassuringly. "Hey! What's the matter?!"

A few agonizing moments passed before the redhead finally blinked, looking around the room. "A... **Akane?!**" She bolted upright in the bed, wrapping her arms tight around Akane. She was shaking like a leaf.

"What's wrong?! Talk to me!" Akane held the quaking girl, bewilderment in her eyes. *What the heck happened to her? I've only seen her lock up like this twice before. Both times, it was when she woke the whole house up screaming because she'd had a nightmare.* Akane blinked in realization. *And both nightmares were about Mikado Sanzenin grappling her and kissing her.* She gasped, pulling Ranko's quivering form tighter to herself than ever. "Oh, **gods**, Ranko, I'm so sorry! I didn't mean to..."

Ranko did not respond in words, but Akane felt a tear that was not her own trickle

down the side of her neck.

“Shh,” Akane cooed quietly. “I’ve got you, girl. You’re safe with me, I promise.”

She lifted Ranko’s head from her shoulder, holding it in both of her hands in front of her and staring directly into the terrified girl’s soul through her teary blue eyes.

*“You **always** will be.”*

Ranko blinked the shampoo from her eyes, shivering as she turned off the shower head. Normally, she hated being compelled by fear of pain to take ice-cold showers every day, but she hadn't slept much the night before, and she was grateful for the shock to her system to help her wake up. Cold water was very uncomfortable to her, thanks to the Full-Body Cat's Tongue, but she knew from past experience that even lukewarm water was unbearably painful. Besides, warm enough water ran the risk of triggering her curse and reverting her to her masculine form, and she dreaded having to face it in the mirror again. She was doing her best to stop thinking about her time as a guy - both the parts she missed, and the parts that embarrassed her - and she worried that seeing a boy in the mirror for the first time in six months, even if only for a moment, would be enough to cost her all the progress she'd made.

After the flashback she experienced while playing with Akane the night before, she'd been forced to tell her new girlfriend everything about Mei, Mikado, and the fight in the alley just before Christmas. She was furious with herself for breaking down and freezing up like that in front of Akane. To her great credit, Akane had listened and supported her through the entire ordeal, even if she had asked some questions Ranko would have preferred not to answer.

Afterward, they hadn't much felt like sleeping, so they went downstairs in their sleeping attire - Akane in the yellow nightdress she now kept in Ranko's closet for the nights she stayed over - and cuddled in a booth watching old movies on one of the televisions on the west wall. Ranko had woken up in bed, but didn't remember climbing the stairs. Either she'd been half-asleep by then, or she'd fallen asleep downstairs and Akane carried her to bed. She blushed at the idea of being basket-carried up the stairs by a girl. By *that* girl.

She looked herself in the eyes in the bathroom mirror, her hands shaking with the cold as she dried her hair with a fluffy lavender towel. She exhaled deeply, summoning her determination. *Today isn't going to be easy, she suspected, but I gotta put the next step of the plan into motion.*

A few minutes later, she emerged from the bathroom, the lavender towel draped around her body modestly and her damp hair braided in her once-signature lone pigtail. Akane sat at the little table near the kitchen area, sipping a cup of tea. She was already re-dressed in her school uniform.

"Hey, you," Akane said with a smile. "Feel better?"

Ranko nodded with a smile of her own. "I think so. You sure you don't wanna borrow a dress or something? You gotta be sick of wearing that uniform."

The raven-haired woman at the pine dinette table nodded, waving off the suggestion. "Yeah, this is fine. Besides, if I come home in a dress Dad doesn't recognize, he's gonna ask questions."

Yeah, I know, Akane. Working on it, Ranko thought as she opened her closet door.

“What do you want to do today?” Akane respectfully turned to face the kitchen as she spoke, this time not peeking as Ranko removed the bath towel wrapped around her breasts and began searching for an outfit.

Ranko grinned as she pulled on her old black gi pants. “Honestly? When’s the last time you had a good spar? I don’t really ever get a chance these days.”

“Seriously?!” Akane laughed heartily as she rinsed her empty teacup out in the steel sink of the little kitchenette. “If that’s really what you want to do, that’s what we’ll do. I don’t suppose your karaoke bar has a dojo in the back?”

Ranko shook her head, not that Akane could see it with her back turned. “I work out up on the roof sometimes, just for exercise and stuff. The roof’s gravel, though, and not really great for sparring. Don’t worry, though. I know a place.”

Akane looked down at her school uniform dress. “I don’t have a gi with me or anything, though, and I know *you* don’t have extras.” She giggled a bit at a realization. “With the way Izzi’s been dressing you lately, you’re more likely to have a *tutu* in your closet.”

“Hey!” Ranko flushed with the realization that her assessment was likely correct. She walked up behind Akane, putting her arms around Akane’s neck and hugging her from behind. She wore a dark gray tee shirt with a white heart printed on it and her old black gi pants. “You’ll be fine. It wouldn’t be the first time you’ve fought dressed like that.”

With a smirk, Akane turned in Ranko’s arms and put her arms gently around the redhead’s waist. “Yeah, but that was usually at school, and it was pretty much reserved for fighting off perverted **boys**. You don’t see any of *those* around here, *do you?*”

Tittering brightly, Ranko craned her neck around her little apartment, opening her eyes wide in mock terror. Her mouth fell open. “Gods! I... ***I hope not!*** Boys are so ***gross! Ewwww!***”

Laughing together as they slipped on their shoes, the pair descended the stairs into the kitchen and slipped out the back door into the alley. Ranko locked the door behind her with her key, and began leading Akane out to the main road.

I wonder if I should hold her hand, Akane thought, biting her lip in contemplation as they walked. *Probably not. She’s getting kind of famous around here now, and I don’t know if she’d want anybody knowing she’s... with a girl. I don’t want to embarrass her.* Instead, she just followed where Ranko led, watching her in quiet contemplation. “Are you **sure** you’re okay, Ranko? After last night, if there’s anything else you wanna talk about...”

The redhead waved off Akane’s concern as the pair turned the corner out of the alleyway and onto the sidewalk. “Yeah, I’m good. It happens, I move on. It’s getting better. But it’s easier if I don’t talk about it.”

Akane bobbed her head in response. “Forget I mentioned it then. Just know if you ever want to...”

“I know.” Ranko managed a soft smile, turning another corner in the direction of the harbor. “Thanks.”



After a stop at a little bakery for pastries and coffee, Ranko led Akane into a secluded patch of a park. Most of it was obscured from the street by a wall, and the grass was still lush and healthy despite the recent cold, possibly due to the canopy of trees that shielded most of the ground from the snow. A single, rickety picnic table made of weather-worn wood stood alone next to a narrow, winding cobblestone path running through the green space. Beyond a black wrought-iron rail, one of the many little rivers that broke up the Minato harbor area into smaller islands flowed lazily by.

“Well, such as it is, here we are,” Ranko shouted over the sound of a train rumbling past on the tracks a few hundred meters away. As she spoke, she returned the wave of an old man in a red plaid shirt that was paddling by the park in a canoe.

“This place is super pretty! How did you find it?” Akane leaned on one of the tree trunks, sighing happily.

Ranko shrugged. “I just stumbled onto it walking one day.” She didn’t have the heart to tell Akane that the little oasis from the bustling city had been her bedroom for the better part of a month before she had wandered into the Phoenix one day. It was quiet, other than the sounds of the trains pulling into the station across the street that had somehow comforted her, like a mechanical, rhythmic lullaby. The station had provided her access to relatively clean bathrooms, affordable vending machines and a place to get out of the rain that was open twenty-four hours.

“So, you ready to get started?” Ranko lifted her leg up almost completely vertical, holding her hamstring in her hands and stretching it.

Akane turned, leaving her purse and the paper bag containing her half-eaten donut on the picnic table. “Are you **sure** about this? I mean, you can’t...”

Ranko waved her off, releasing her hamstring to do so. “Don’t let the dresses and stuff fool you; I’m tougher than I look.” She raised her other leg, repeating the stretch.

Nodding, Akane hugged her left arm between her right and her chest, stretching her shoulder. “If you’re sure, but promise you’ll stop me if you need to.”

Ranko’s response was to drop into a defensive taekwondo stance. *Come on, Akane*, she thought to herself, *I need to see that you can do this.*

"I mean it, Ranko," Akane said as she switched to stretching her other arm. "I'm worried. I don't want to hurt you."

"I said I'm **fine**, Akane!" Ranko insisted, shaking her head before resuming her stance. "I can take care of myself!" *I think.*

Akane nodded, settling into a karate forward stance with her left arm extended down and forward over her outstretched knee, and her right cocked behind her at the waist. "Alright! Let's see!" She swung forward with a tentative fist, and Ranko kicked at her wrist, blocking it with the sole of her shoe.

The redhead laughed, standing casually. "I know you can do better than that. What's the matter, don't want to hit a **girl?!?**" She watched carefully, despite the mocking tone in her voice.

Akane smiled and shook her head. "Not one I'm **dating**, no."

Blushing, Ranko motioned her forward with her hand. "Come on, give me a workout here. I promise I won't hold it against ya."

"Okay, but you asked for it!" With a loud *kiai*, Akane whipped her leg around, barely clearing Ranko's head as the shorter girl ducked beneath the roundhouse kick. Akane followed up with a sweep from the left, but Ranko hopped effortlessly over her leg.

Akane righted herself. "You know, you don't have to do the whole no-hitting-girls thing anymore either. You *can* fight back."

Ranko nodded. "I know." *Still don't gotta feel great about it, but today, I don't have much choice. I gotta see that you can do this, and for that, I gotta rile you up.* With a piercing *kiai* of her own, the redhead threw a high punch aiming for Akane's left shoulder.

Akane whirled out of its range, delivering a snap kick to the right side of Ranko's torso. It struck her in the ribs.

The redhead crumpled to the grass, coughing as she clutched at her side. *Gods, I forgot just how freakin' strong she is!* It felt like she'd been shot in the kidney with a cannonball. *Damn this stupid Cat's Tongue thing!*

"Oh, no! Ranko, **are you okay?!?**" Akane rushed forward, bending down to check on her girlfriend.

Ranko groaned a bit as she caught her breath. She braced herself as Akane closed on her. *This is gonna hurt now, but it's gotta be done.* She reached up suddenly and grabbed Akane's wrist, pulling her down onto the grass next to her and assaulting her neck, legs and ribs with a flurry of tickles.

Barely any of Ranko's attacks landed before Akane matched her speed, swatting away her pinching fingers and even landing a few of her own. "**Ha!** Now who's *too slow?*"

Ranko beamed, giggling as she was tickled despite the pain still radiating through her ribcage when she laughed. “Okay, **okay!** You win! I **give up!**”

Akane rocked to her feet, offering her girlfriend a hand up. Her companion groaned as Akane pulled her to her feet. “Are you **sure** you’re okay, Ran-chan?”

The shorter girl nodded. “Yeah, I’ll be fine in a minute. The Cat’s Tongue doesn’t make me *get* hurt more. It just makes me *feel* the hurt more.” She flashed a tentative smile as she tried to stand up straight. “I think we’re gonna call that a day on the sparring, though.” *She did it. She’s got it. And besides, fuck, that hurt.*

Akane shouldered her purse, this time not being shy about taking Ranko’s slender hand in her own. “Come on then, let’s get out of here.”

Ranko blushed as she looked down at their intertwined fingers, but smiled contentedly despite her pain. *She’s ready.* “Akane, I want to talk to you about something.”

“Of course. Anything,” Akane said, swaying her arm merrily and taking Ranko’s with it as the pair made the ascent up the embankment back to the sidewalk.

The satisfied young songstress walked alongside her partner, her right hand on her ribcage and her left enveloped in Akane’s. “So, I had this **crazy idea...**”



“*Please take your seats,*” came the droning announcement over a series of crackly recess-mount speakers in the ceiling of the smallish train station.

Akane looked up at the train, glancing back at her partner with a nervous expression in her eyes. “And you’re **sure** about this?”

Ranko nodded emphatically, stepping closer to her as the small group of assembled travelers around them began to board the northbound train. “I know you can do it, Akane. I believe in you.”

The black-haired girl scoffed. “That makes **one** of us. You know this is freakin’ crazy, right?”

Ranko squeezed her hand as they approached the entrance to the second-to-last car on the commuter train. “I mean, I **did** lead with that. But crazy has always been kind of **our thing**, hasn’t it?”

Akane laughed. “I guess it has, yeah! So... any last-minute advice?”

“**Don’t get tickled,**” Ranko said, holding her finger up as if to indicate her words as a point of emphasis from a wizened old master.

Laughing louder still, Akane shook her head. “Of course not, silly girl! That’s only for **you**.” She leaned down, giving Ranko a gentle hug, mindful of her sore ribs.

Ranko squeezed back tightly, not caring if it hurt to do so. “Good luck, Akane. You can do it. Akane, I... I...”

“Final boarding call!” The shrill announcement over the public address system jolted the pair out of their embrace.

“I gotta go.” Akane adjusted her purse on her shoulder. “I’ll see you soon, ‘kay?” She turned, walking the last forty meters or so on the platform alone and stepping through the open door of the train car.

Ranko stood at the railing, watching her board. As the doors closed and the train began to accelerate, she finally summoned the words she’d meant to say, even though her partner could no longer hear them.

“I love you, Akane.”

“So, how **was it?**” Yui smirked, bending her knees a bit so she could elbow her much shorter sister in the ribs gently through her pale blue hoodie. “**Details, girl!**”

Blushing, Mei picked up the three flaming *Dragonfire* cocktails Yui had crafted, carefully balancing them on her corkboard tray. “It was... *fine*, I guess. I dunno.” Before Yui could reply, she darted off to deliver the burning libations to the waiting collegians at table thirteen.

Izumi shook her head, bopping along with the rock music blasting from the sound system. It was running on random play mode, as the Phoenix’ new stage still sat vacant. “Should’a let me dress you, girl,” she yelled to Mei as the blue-haired server returned to the bar area. “I could have picked you out something that would’ve ended up on the floor, **guaranteed.**”

“**Izzi!** I wasn’t trying to get with him on the **first date** or anything!” Mei pulled her hair forward, hiding her face behind the twin blue pigtails that hung almost all the way down to her breasts. “I’m not even sure I liked him that much. I don’t think I’m gonna go out with him again.”

Frowning, the brunette threw her arm over Mei’s shoulder. “Aww, honey. It didn’t work out? He seemed nice enough when he picked you up.”

Mei shrugged nonchalantly. “I mean, he was. He wasn’t, like, gross or anything. Just, kinda boring. Wanted to talk about his car a lot. Like, a *lot*. He didn’t do anything wrong, he just... didn’t really do anything *right*, either. Just, not much of a spark there.”

“Yeah,” Yui replied, a sinister sneer on her face as she caught a spinning bottle of vodka out of the air behind her back and upended it over her mixing glass. “I did think he was a little... *tall* for you, anyway. People probably thought you were his **kid!**”

Mei slipped out from under Izumi’s arm and whirled on her sister, a *mostly* playful glare on her eyes as she stomped her white cross-trainer on the hardwood floor behind the bar. “**Yui Fukawa!** I **told** you to stop bringing that up! It happened **one time! ONE!** And...”

“Should’ve brought him here, Mei-Mei,” Izumi said through her giggling fit as she wiped a wet spot on the lacquered wood counter of the service bar with a blue bar towel. She was careful to hold her elbows high to keep the loose, flowing sleeves of

her navy blue peasant shirt out of the pooled condensation. “At least here, the bartenders know you don’t have to ask **Daddy** for permission to have a **grown-up drink.**”

“Speak for yourself, Iz,” Yui said with a mirthfully devious sneer. “I would **absolutely** have asked - what was his name, *Satoru*? - if his **little girl** was allowed to have a mojito.” She wiped her damp fingers off on the seat of her black jeans, swaying on her chunky heels as she reached for a bottle of tequila. “And then probably have made it virgin anyway, just to fuck with ya.”

Izumi motioned to table four, near the stage, with her neck. There, a man in a black sport coat and matching slacks sat alone, watching the empty stage expectantly through his mirrored sunglasses despite the dim lighting of the darkened bar room. “What about Mr. Snazzy over there? What’s his deal? You could try making a move on him.”

Again, Mei shrugged, looking over at the odd man as Yui passed a margarita over the counter to a tall, thin woman in an emerald green dress. “I tried talking to him before, and he didn’t even let me take a drink order. Just waved me off. Honestly, he was a little bit rude.” She glanced back at the slatted blue door leading to the back room. “Somehow, I think **I’m** not the sister he’s here for tonight.”

“Yeah, come to think of it...” Yui craned her neck, scanning the bar for a shock of red she did not spy. “Where the hell **is** Ranko, anyway? She should have been down here at least half an hour ago.”

Mei headed for the saloon door. “I’ll run upstairs and check on her.”

Yui shook her head, grabbing the door before Mei could push through it. “I’ll go up. I’m due for a break anyway, and **you** need to go talk to Mr. High Roller over there. It looks like he might have some *money.*”



Ranko stood in front of the mirror attached to her closet door in a modest yellow dress on loan from Izumi. She stared into her own eyes, willing herself courage. She’d been worried for Akane all day since dropping her off at the train station, and it showed no sign of abatement. *What have I done? What if Akane ends up hurt because of my idiot idea?*

She tried again to put it out of her mind, not that she’d had much success with that all afternoon. However, she had more pressing issues at the moment. *Gotta give it*

at least one more try. Inhaling as deep of a breath as she could manage, she belted a few notes into the void of her closet.

“I need a hero! I’m holding out for a…”

The teenager winced, the verse cutting off as she doubled over slightly and braced her right side with her hands. She didn’t think Akane had hit her that hard, but her rib cage was still far too sore for her to control her breath, and she just couldn’t hold a note. *Fuck. Owwww.*

There was a shop knock on the door leading out to the second floor landing, and Yui cracked it open, not quite enough to peek in. “Ranko? You decent, kiddo?”

A pained “*yeah*” came in reply.

The tall blonde entered to find Ranko sitting on her bed clutching her abdomen. “Feeling rough, huh?”

Ranko bit her lip, nodding and looking down at the floor. “It hurts so bad, I can barely breathe.”

Yui nodded sagely, entering the room and sitting on the edge of Ranko’s unmade twin bed. “I know the feels, hon. It happens to all of us. Try a hot compress and some ibuprofen? It works for me when I’m having a rough one.”

Ranko blushed furiously. *Yui must think it’s... that. Ugh! Gross!* Fortunately, that hadn’t happened to her. Not yet, anyway. She didn’t know if it ever would; her high school anatomy class at Furinkan hadn’t really gotten into the particulars of the Cursed Springs of Jusenkyo. She certainly hoped not. *That’s one part of being a “normal” girl that I’d be just fine with missing out on,* she thought as she flopped down heavily onto the bed next to her sister. “I’m not sure I can sing tonight. I can barely stand up. I’m sorry, Yui.”

Yui bobbed her head, putting her arm around her sister’s shoulders and giving her a gentle squeeze. “It’s okay. I’ll let Mama and the girls know. It’s not super busy down there for a Saturday, so we can handle it, I think. Just take it easy, and we’ll check on you when we can.”

Ranko smiled weakly, curling up on her bed and tucking her knees into her chest in the fetal position. A slight chill travelled up her legs, and she hoped her dress hadn’t ridden up enough to expose her white panties to her elder sister. “Thanks, Yui. I owe ya one.”

Mei strode up the three steps onto the stage platform, turning on one of the three

dynamic microphones and tapping it to draw the attention of the listless crowd. “We’re sorry, everybody, but Ranko’s not feeling well tonight, and she won’t be able to perform.”

A disappointed groan rose from the assembled revelers. *Saturday night isn’t really the best time for this to happen, Ranko. I know it’s out of your control, though,* Mei thought as she swayed nervously on the stage. “Don’t forget, everybody, we still have the karaoke station. Why don’t some of you get up and sing tonight?” A college-aged boy in a red polo shirt and khaki slacks climbed the stage nervously, and the crowd pacified enough to give him a chance.

Mei handed the young man the microphone and dismounted the stage, beginning to make her rounds to the various tables. She’d been handling table service alone all night, as Ranko wasn’t able to work, leaving Izumi and Yui to run the two bars and Hana back in the kitchen. There was a table of five women having an impromptu bachelorette party, a very nervous-looking guy on a first date with a stunning young woman in orange, and a six-top of rugby players still in their purple jerseys from nearby Minato University. Still, the table with the lone, well-dressed man continued to intrigue Mei the most, and she approached it somewhat nervously. She noticed that there was a black case with a handle on the table, which Mei recognized as a portable video camera. “Hey! Are you sure I can’t get you anything, sugar?”

“I **said** I’m not thirsty.” The man looked up at her with a bit of dismissive consternation. “You’re the stage manager here, right? Are you sure there won’t be a performance tonight?”

How rude. Doesn’t even take those glasses off to talk to people. Well, one thing’s for sure, Izzie. I won’t be asking him out, Mei thought as she gave a slow nod. “Unfortunately so. My sister’s really feeling under the weather tonight. We’re very sorry.” She offered a shallow bow by way of apology.

The customer sighed, standing and picking up the plastic case by the handle. “I understand, but I’m really hoping to see her as soon as I can.” He reached into his breast pocket, pulling out a glossy black business card and handing it to Mei. “Please see to it that someone lets me know when she’ll be singing again?”

Mei nodded in confusion, flipping the card over in her hand as the well-dressed man began to head for the front door. Her eyes widened to nearly thrice their normal size as she read the tightly-packed white kanji.

“Holy...”

Moments later, Ranko’s apartment door swung open with a sudden crash. Ranko lifted her head from her pillow to see Mei stumble into the room clumsily, as if she’d

tripped on the top stair in her rush.

The redhead cracked a weak smile, sitting up in bed a bit to make room for Mei on the most comfortable seat in the tiny apartment. “Whoa, take it easy, Mei! Mama doesn’t need to have two of us laid up.”

Mei clamored to her feet, all but pouncing onto the edge of the bed. She looked positively manic, though with excitement or nervousness, Ranko could not tell. She fidgeted with a shiny black card in her hands.

“Ranko, I need to talk to you about something, but... you’re not gonna ***believe it!***”

"*Huh.* Sony's down again. I should buy a few more shares, I guess." Nabiki popped a piece of fried tofu into her mouth with her fingers, chewing as she turned to the next page in the business section of the newspaper. She idly scratched an itch through her orange tank top, swallowing and reaching blindly for another bite.

"Where are you even getting the money for all that, Nabiki?" Akane looked up incredulously across the dining room table at her sister, having just finished her own breakfast.

Chuckling, Nabiki snapped the paper closed, tossing the folded broadsheet to the table with a confident smirk. "Oh, *please*, little sister. My portfolio's performing wonderfully. Plus, I've already got the market cornered on recycled term papers at Shibuya Academy, I still get a piece of the action I passed down to Midori at Furinkan, and then I have my... *other* ventures, to boot." The brunette snickered, wagging a finger in the air with the spark of an idea. "Speaking of which, you mind being a doll and wearing that new green skirt all you got for Christmas today? Kuno hasn't seen that one yet, and with as cold as it's been, the poor boy hasn't seen any decent leg in months. *Oooh*, I bet I can even charge him **extra!**"

"**NABIKI TENDO!**" Akane crossed her arms over her chest in her beige gi, growling loudly over her elder sister's mirthful laughter.

"Aww, come on! Don't be stingy, Akane." Nabiki shot a quick wink at her sister, making sure neither of the men in the room were looking before doing so. "After all, our dear *pigtails girl* is nowhere to be found, so **somebody** has to pick up the slack in the modeling department. A girl's gotta make a living, after all."

That little... did she just blackmail me because she knows where Ranko is?! Or was she just teasing? Either way, I can't take the risk. Akane glowered, lowering her eyes in defeat. I fucking hate this cloak-and-dagger bullshit. I just wanna be with her. It's all they could talk about a year ago. Why does it have to be so fucking taboo, now that we actually want it?!

"**Fine.**" Akane turned her eyes away, crossing her arms with an indignant **hrmph!**

Despite the tension in the room, it was a beautiful morning; the birds were singing, the sun was shining, and the sliding door was open to the yard and the dojo beyond. Kasumi was shuttling back and forth between the dining room and the kitchen in her favorite pink dress, clearing the dishes from a resplendent breakfast. The girls' father and Mr. Saotome were sitting on the porch as they often did after breakfast,

huddled over the shogi board. Genma was even in his human form, a rarity of late. Both men wore their training gi - Genma's in white, her father's brown - though Akane hadn't the foggiest idea why; neither had meaningfully worked out in weeks.

Sighing quietly to herself, Akane thought about the crazy plan Ranko had suggested. Everything was ready, but now that it was time, she didn't know if she could go through with it. Her girlfriend's insane idea would send shockwaves through her family whether it worked or not, and what happened next, she had no idea. *Sure, it could remove a big obstacle for our relationship, but at what cost? What if I can't do it? What if I let her down?*

Akane's father broke the awkward silence, startling her as he emphatically slammed a piece down on the shogi board hard enough to rattle its neighbors nearly out of their places. **"Ha!** Got you, Saotome!"

His opponent adjusted the wire frame of his glasses as he surveyed the board. Grumbling as he found all of his strategic options - within the rules and without - closed off, he removed his last piece from the wooden board. "Good game, Tendo! Another?"

Soun shook his head, rocking back and standing from his cross-legged position on the floor. "No, I'm afraid not. I have some city council business to handle. And besides, weren't you going to patch the dojo roof today? It's still leaking terribly in there."

Genma glowered, a sullen expression darkening his face as it often did when he was forced to take on responsibilities. "I **suppose** I can take a look at it." He stood, stretching with his hands on his hips, and his spine popped a few times as he arched it backward. "We're too old to be doing that sort of work though, aren't we? I thought this is why we had kids, eh, Tendo? Then again, my useless lump of a son isn't much help, abandoning us all like he did."

Akane gritted her teeth, trying to center herself and not let her emotions show. The closer she and Ranko had become of late, the harder it was to even *look* at her girlfriend's father, let alone listen to him constantly put her down. *You shut up, you old son of a bitch. You'd be so proud of her if you knew what she's doing. At least, you would, if you had anything resembling a soul.* She cringed, hiding the two halves of the lacquered chopstick she'd just broken in half in the hip pocket of her gi pants.

"Saotome, I'm **sure** Ranma is doing what he thinks is best." Soun clapped his longtime friend on the back hard enough to elicit another quiet pop from his neck. "After all, he's eighteen. He's practically a man now."

From her seat at the table, Akane chuckled grimly. *If you only knew, Dad*, she mused.

A loud guffaw snapped Akane's attention back to Ranko's father. "**Please!** At the first sign of trouble, he ran away!" Genma turned his back to Akane, leaning on the doorframe and gazing out at the still koi pond in the yard beyond. "That's not how a **man** behaves. That's the act of a **coward.**"

How fucking dare you, Akane thought. Her mind raced. Her pulse quickened. Her face flushed. *After everything Ranko's been through?! After she spent months sleeping on the street to try and preserve her honor? After having to build her whole life over from scratch, while you sit here on your fat ass and eat our food and won't even lift a finger to... I won't let it stand. I can't!*

Akane stood, slamming her hands down on the table. "You **stop** talking about her that way! You stop it **right now**, Mr. Saotome!" She did her best to hide her wince as her words still lingered in the air. *Shit. Shouldn't have said she*, Akane admonished herself. She worried that doing so would tip them off to even the tiniest part of Ranko's new life, but she had been too angry to measure her words.

Genma turned to look at her. "Akane, I don't understand why you still defend that little ingrate. **You** should be the angriest of all. He abandoned you, too. He had a responsibility to you, to your father, and to the art, and he ran away. Clearly, his engagement to you didn't matter to him at all. He **threw you away.**" He crossed his ankles, leaning back on the doorframe and folding his arms over his chest. "Like **trash.**"

Akane growled at him, gripping the edge of the oak table tight in her hands. She wasn't sure if she was holding it to steady herself, or to prepare to use it as a weapon. "You... you don't even know if Ranma is **alive or dead**, and you stand there and talk about him like he's **dirt!** That's your fucking **child!** Do you not even have a **heart?! How DARE you?!**"

"Oh, my!" Kasumi clicked her tongue, resting her hand on Akane's back. "Akane, dear, *please* try to be more mindful of your lang..."

"**Back off**, Kasumi!" Akane shrugged her sister's hand off of her shoulders, her fiery glare never leaving her family's seemingly permanent houseguest. She did not so much as turn to offer a conciliatory glance to her sister, even if she did regret snapping at Kasumi.

Ranko's father shook his head, scoffing under his breath. "Oh, he's not dead. He's too resourceful for that, at least. I'm sure he's out in the woods somewhere, probably lost. Maybe he ran to his mother, like all weaklings eventually do. Truly, I'm

surprised he hasn't come crawling back in disgrace already. I'm sure it'll be **any day** now."

Akane's hand made its way up the seam of her gi top, her face red with fury. *If I go through with this, there's no turning back. Maybe Ranko was right. Maybe it's the only way. And besides, even if it doesn't do what she hoped... the son of a bitch has it coming.*

"Who knows? With the way he looks as a girl, I'm sure he can find **some** way to make a living." Genma turned to the open door, looking up at the sky with a self-amused laugh that turned Akane's stomach like gas station sushi. "Either way, I truly am ashamed to call that honorless *whelp* my **son**. When he **does** inevitably come begging for forgiveness, I'll see that he's punished for his insolence."

The teen quaked in rage. "That's it! You have **no right** to speak about her that way! Not after everything you... I've... ***I've had enough out of you!***" She reached a trembling left into the pocket inside her gi top, pulling out a piece of heavy ivory parchment folded into thirds. It was lined with columns of formal kanji characters, the black ink in a carefully-practiced calligraphy that had taken her five tries to get right. She held it up for a moment before slamming it on the table in front of him hard enough to rattle her empty teacup and wooden rice bowl onto the floor. *Here we go, Ranko. Hope you know what you're doing*, she thought to herself.

Genma turned and laughed, glancing dismissively down at the paper as Akane lifted her palm from it. "Oh? And what's *th...*" He fell silent as his eyes parsed the first few characters. *It couldn't... she wouldn't dare! She wouldn't dream of it!*

Akane's father walked over and looked down at the paper curiously. Like his best friend, he too recoiled in horror at the sight of it. "No, Akane, you can't! You ***mustn't!***"

The black-haired girl growled through her gritted teeth, granting only the slightest turn of her head to address her father. "I can, and I ***will!***"

The enraged young martial artist turned back to the balding, bespectacled man, her brown eyes flashing with fury. Akane's breath shook in her lungs. She could hear her heartbeat thundering in her ears, and to her, it sounded like the drums of war. It may as well have been.

After all the times you stood up for my honor, Ranko... It's my turn. It's the least I can do... for the woman I love.

She spoke with a simmering rage. Her voice was not loud, but every word was sharpened into a razor's edge. Every syllable dripped with venom. She knew her

words would strike fear into the old man's heart, and she wanted them to. She **needed** them to. She was counting on it.

“Genma Saotome... I, Akane Tendo of the *Tendo* School of Anything-Goes Martial Arts, **hereby challenge the Saotome School of Anything-Goes Martial Arts for your dojo!**”

Genma seemed to shrink in stature, and he sniveled meekly, staggering back a few steps and looking to Soun in desperation. “Akane... why... *how could you...*”

“**Do you accept?!**” Akane's voice snapped through the air like a whip, and Kasumi cowered back into the corner by the doorway into the kitchen at the sound of it. “**Or do you yield?!**”

