

Being You Is Suffering

So, there I was, driving down Interstate Ten, bound for one of the most miserable places on Earth – Seattle.

Now, don't get me wrong. Seattle actually has some pretty awesome sights, like the Space Needle, the ferries of the Puget Sound, the Fremont Troll, the Pike Place Market, and a more than a few metric tons of art. It had a lot of the industries going on over there that were right up my alley. But it rained there. Frequently. Not a lot of actual rainfall, mind you - less than many East Coast cities actually. But the frequency and duration of the rainfalls... Let me put it this way, Seattle usually only see about fifty-eight sunny days out of the year. The rest are covered by an iron curtain of overcast skies.

They say that Seattle is the Emerald City, but that's just because all the moss that grows there makes it look like that from a distance. It was also known to be the leading major metropolitan area in suicides year after year without fail. I knew for sure that I was gonna be on antidepressants within a year.

The thought itself was so depressing that it made me drowsy, causing me to doze at the wheel. Not even the Uber Monster energy brew that I finished off not even ten minutes ago seemed to be helping. I was considering stopping at the next rest stop when I dozed again, imagining pulling onto the off-ramp and letting myself blissfully zone out to the tune of my faithful little truck's engine purr softly while blowing warm air over my cold–

The sudden jarring of my truck jolted me right out of my doze as adrenaline began flooding my system, augmenting the energy supplement I had earlier. I reacted instinctively – foot off the gas, clutch in, pump the brakes, keep the wheel under firm control and try to get the truck back on the shoulder!

Where's the road!? TREES! AVOID AVOID AVOID! HOUSE! STOOOOP!

My truck was heavily laden with the back end filled all the way to the top of the camper shell, and a four-by-eight foot trailer loaded to it's full capacity as well. But my truck, a well used and well cared for 1998 Mazda B2500 which I had lovingly named 'Scrappy', had front wheel anti-lock brakes and the rear axle had enough weight on it to really dig in.

I was shocked when all I did was just bump against the house with a dull thud.

For a moment, all I did was sit there and have a moment of BSOD. My limbs shaking, I applied the emergency brake, almost forgot to put Scrappy into neutral before letting off the clutch, and shut the engine off. Leaving the headlights on, I opened the door and clamored out of Scrappy. The first thing I checked was how badly damaged the house was. I wasn't worried about my vehicle because I was driving a truck – albeit a small one, but still a truck.

Looking around the front end, I saw that I had done nothing more than scuff the paint. Probably about ten bucks to get the right color of paint and touch it up. The most troublesome part would be the color matching.

With a huge and explosive sigh, I then went on to inspect my vehicle, then the trailer, and finally their respective loads. Scrappy's rear axle didn't have ABS like the front axle did, and so the rear wheels locked when I firewalled the brake pedal and had carved furrows into the soft earth of the driveway. Which was probably my saving grace. So long as you're keeping it in a straight line, the quickest way to stop in soft earth was to just floor it.

But how had I wound up on this driveway? Interstates, even in Texas, did not usually have residential drives right off the highway itself – that's what the frontage roads are for. Did I somehow take a highway to heaven and wind up here?

There was also something off about this place. I couldn't place my finger on it, but it sure as hell didn't feel like west Texas. Or even New Mexico.

“Oi! Nan-des'ka?”

I just about jumped out of my skin. I never heard anyone approaching, and the odd pitch of the voice threw me as well. I snapped around and was confronted with a child-like figure with a massive, barely organized mess of pink hair. She was wearing the sort of tired look that only people woken in the middle of the night by strange travelers would wear.

“Whoah! Jeeeeze, you startled me there,” I said. I hate being keyed up on adrenaline like this. I kinda like being on the jittery side, but not this much. “Ah, sorry about this mess,” I continued lamely.

“Heeeehhhhh?” said the girl as she leaned in to inspect me more carefully.

That sound, combined with the odd pitch in her voice raised a flag in my head. It was a sound I had grown familiar with, and even loved triggering in the people of Japan.

“Anata wa Nihon o shitte imasu ka?” she said, which cinched it for me.

“Ah... Iie,” I replied. “Choto-choto Nihongo. Very few words.”

“So you are an American then,” she said in surprisingly clear English that smacked of something either Brooklyn or Jersey – I could never tell the difference with those accents. This was getting very weird, so my next question was very much to the point.

“Uhm, pardon my ignorance, but could you tell me where I'm at, little miss?”

“Sure. You're in Japan. And if I'm guessing right you were someplace else before hand.”

“Texas,” I confirmed. Was this some sort of crazy put-on?

The girl nodded her head with a smug, satisfied smile. “Well, why don't we see if we can get you sorted out?”

“Uhm, mind if I use the toilet first?” I asked. If I really was in Japan, then this would tell me for sure.

“Sure sure,” she said breezily. “Go around the side, through the sliding door, up the stairs and it's the door at the very end of the hall. Can't miss it. Just don't go stomping around and waking anyone up.”

“Thanks,” I said as I pocketed my keys and anything else that might jangle. As I made my way inside the house and up the stairs, I couldn't help but notice that this place seemed insanely familiar to me, but I just couldn't quite place it.

Just as I reached the top of the stairs I heard a sound like static, drawing my eyes to the source. To my shock, a woman walked through the wall to my side, just inches from me. I yelped in surprise, startling her into yelping and punching me in the face. Stars flashed in my eyes and the next thing I knew I was weightless and looking up at the timbered ceiling.

I had just enough time to think to myself, *Oh fuck, this is gonna be bad.*

My neck hit first, and a horrible, wrenching pop sounded throughout my head.

Then I felt nothing more. Just a terrifying numbness that overcame me. I couldn't move. I was still breathing... but it was so soft.

Oh god... my neck was broken! Can't move, can't speak, breathing is starting to slow down... I was going to die in a few minutes and there wasn't anything I could do!

Feet came pounding my way – the girl from before.

“Hey! Are you alright!?” she cried out. “Say something, will you?”

I could only give her a helpless look.

“Oh hell no!” she breathed and proceeded into outright crisis mode. “RYOKO!” she cried out. The woman that startled me before appeared overhead. Apparently she knew that if whatever

happened had this girl that upset then she should be concerned. In fact, she had an expression of 'Oh crap, I fucked up this time, didn't I?' on her face.

She made some terse instructions in Japanese that I had no way of catching with my limited vocabulary as she opened... some kind of... hole in the air? And began to rummage through the unseen contents. With a short bark of success, she removed some unremarkable oblong device that fit neatly in the palm of her small hand.

“Boy I am so glad I never throw anything like this out. Hang on, mister, we'll get you through this.” She then looked to the woman she called Ryoko and nodded. The woman then gestured and I was somehow levitated up off the stairs. Before I could really start to wonder how the hell that was happening, the smaller girl pushed my shirt up and planted the device at the very bottom of my solar plexus. Suddenly my breathing picked up.

Right away I knew that the device was somehow stimulating my diaphragm muscle to keep working, even though it was no longer receiving commands from my brain. Who the hell are these people?

And now, more were showing up. A girl with cerulean blue hair and crimson irises. Another with impossibly long vividly violet hair and equally violet eyes. A cat... rabbit... thing... A dusky-skinned, blue-eyed blonde with hair cascading in tight ringlets, and a boy with short-cropped black hair and brown eyes.

A sudden surge of questions, imprecations, and explanations, all in Japanese, suddenly ensued. The messy-maned pink-haired girl had to verbally beat back the violet-haired one, and seemed to imperiously command the young man to usher everyone back to their rooms. Reluctantly, they all left except the tall woman with cyan-hair and amber eyes who sucker-punched me earlier.

“Okay, now that the riff-raff are dealt with, that muscle stimulator should keep you alive for the moment,” said the girl. “Let's get you into my lab.”

LAB!?!?

Within minutes, the tiny woman that could only be Washu Hakubi had me on a medical table, my neck set, and my spinal cord and vertebra swiftly being mended by the medical nanomachines she had injected me with.

The were no jokes, no slapstick, no pratfalls, not even any whimsical retorts. Washu remained professional, alert, and competent throughout the entire process, and Ryoko simply stood by watching for any sign that she needed any help.

“I apologize for my daughter's sudden reaction,” Washu said as she sat back to relax, wiping what little sweat had accumulated on her brow. “You should be able to talk now. Give it a shot.”

Tentatively I muttered a few vowel sounds. Wonder of all wonders, I could talk again.

“It's okay,” I croaked. “She saw a strange person in her home in the middle of the night. What scared me was that she came through the wall. By the way... is your name Washu-chan?”

“It is,” said Washu slowly. “Who are you?”

If I could have shaken my head, I would have. “Nobody,” I said. “Just someone who's lost in more ways than one.”

“Hey, you got a name, don't you?” growled Ryoko. I heard something go thunk in the background which caused Ryoko to grumble indignantly.

I sighed. “She's got a point. I'm just feeling sorry for myself. We'll get into it later, but for now, my name is Garrick Grimm.” I froze in surprise. Where the hell had that come from? “Uh, no, that's not right. I must have hit my head harder than I thought. Really, my name is Garri-” I froze as the unwanted monicker tried to come out of my mouth once more.

“Is something wrong?” asked Washu as she leaned over me with a concerned expression.

“That's... that's not my name,” I said in horror. Really, I decided I was going to try and force it out – strange compulsion be damned, I liked my name! But the more I tried to think of it, the more it eluded me. It was like as though my old name had been completely blanked out from my memory and replaced with something else.

“My name... it's gone.”

Washu and Ryoko exchanged horrified looks. They had heard of all kinds of terrible things being done to a person, but transporting them across continents and then altering their minds to fit some twisted scheme... it was the absolute worst sort of crime.

I suddenly felt Washu's hand lay gently on my head. “Don't worry,” she said gently. “Garrick Grimm is a good name. Garrick means He That Rules With A Spear, and Grimm is an ancient surname that means The Fierce One. Whoever gave that name to you was not thinking lightly of you.”

“I don't feel very fierce now,” I muttered. “Just hurt... and so far from home.”

“Where is your home anyhow?”

“I was in the middle of moving when I arrived here, so it doesn't matter really... but in spirit, my home has always been the City of San Antonio in Texas.”

Washu nodded. “Home of the Alamo... and one of the most famous Pyrrhic victories of earth's Modern Age.”

“Pyrrhic victory?” asked Ryoko.

“A hollow victory,” I replied. “Named for a general who led a siege against another city-state. He successfully sacked the city, but his entire army had been reduced to but a handful of men. In the case of the Battle of the Alamo, General Santa Anna led about 2,000 men against the 200 in the fortified mission. After six days, the Alamo did eventually fall, and all but two of the defenders were tortured and slain – those two were sent to warn the rest of the Texian Army that Santa Anna was coming and would not take any prisoners. However, the battle was a hardship for his army. It was reduced in effectiveness, and the message brought by the messengers to the capitol, located in what is now called the City of Houston, galvanized the entire population. The messengers also warned everyone they came across, causing everyone to flee to the capitol. The end result was a massive surge of volunteers for the Texian Army, and Santa Anna was completely defeated.”

Ryoko made an appreciative whistle at that. “Sounds like you guys don't put up with much.”

I smiled. “We've had a long-standing slogan in my home – 'Don't mess with Texas.’” Ryoko cackled and Washu shook her head, but she was smiling regardless.

“Okay you two,” said Washu. “I can see now that the healing process is going well, so we're going to put you in a bed and sedate you so you don't move while you heal – the new tissues being constructed are very delicate at this stage.”

“Alright then,” I sighed. “But can someone turn off the headlights in my truck before they drain the battery? I'd hate to have to ask for a jumpstart... Oh, and get my cat. He's probably pretty shaken up by now.”

“A cat?” asked Washu. “Is he...”

“He's a big, sweet natured guy... but he's something of a bully with other cats. If you leave him in the room with me with a litter box, water and food he'll be okay. He'll just curl up on top of me and go to sleep. He doesn't even knead his claws on me.”

“That's... impressive.”

“Not really. He found out the hard way that I don't like feeling claws in my skin.” I smiled. “He knows that if he wants my attention he can meow or even put his paws to my legs... without the claws. I reinforced that behavior with positive attention.”

Washu chuckled. “Okay then. So, headlights and cat. Anything else?”

“Nah, not unless you guys need my truck moved right away.”

“It'll keep.”

So, in short order, I was placed in a small but comfortable room in Washu's lab, left with my cat purring deeply at my side, and whacked up on enough sedatives to knock out a horse. I was, for the moment, content, but I knew that would not last forever. I was in Tenchi Muyo and here Murphy ruled with an iron first.

When I woke up, Washu was there.

“Good morning sleepyhead,” she chirped cheerfully. There was something odd about the words coming out of her mouth, but I couldn't quite place my finger on it.

“Mornin' Washu-chan,” I muttered as I began to stretch out my oh-so-sore muscles. My cat, Renee, began meowing intently right by my head. With a grumble of, “get over here you big lug,” I pulled the hefty feline – a solid twenty-five pounds of which only a slight minority was fat – up onto my chest and gave him the attention he wanted. “Any chance I can get an anti-inflammatory? Like some Ibuprofen? Not sure what the Japanese name for it is.”

Washu chuckled. “Oh, no worries Garrick. I know exactly what you mean.”

I blinked at that. “You're speaking Japanese.”

“Yup!” said Washu happily.

“And evidently so am I.”

“You got it.”

“You did something to my language centers while I was out.”

“You're on a roll now.”

“... What else did you do?”

“Not much else, really,” said Washu.

“Washu-chan. I don't know if you ever took the Hippocratic oath, but I am your patient, and this patient has some very serious questions he'd like answered.”

Washu huffed. “Oh, fine. Spoilsport. Basically, I fixed a few things that could become serious problems for you later on. Stuff like Alzheimer's Disease, Cancer, Diabetes and one of the mildest cases of Dyslexia I've ever seen.”

I raised an eyebrow. “You didn't fix anything else?”

“There was a couple of other things I wanted to fix, but I thought better of it.”

“These things being?”

“An odd combination of ADD and Asperger's Syndrome. That's kinda weird – you're capable of being distracted real easily when your bored, but you can also hyper-focus to the point of starvation. Being you must be painful sometimes.”

I snorted. “C'mon. You're Washu Hakubi, intergalactically renowned supergenius. Surely a defect in brain chemistry isn't that exciting for you?”

Washu sniffed disdainfully. “It's one thing to read about it. It's another to observe for yourself and draw your own conclusions. Besides, we never really got to discussing how you seem to be so knowledgeable.”

“Oh yeah. Sorry about that tangent back there. If you thought that one was bad, you should have seen my brothers and I on a good night – one of us would start a debate over some matter, and the towards the end of the night we can't even remember what we started out on.”

Washu laughed. “Yes, nice try just now, too. So spill it.”

I shrugged. “I'm a dimensional displacee through some means not of my knowledge or power. In my home universe, someone created an animated short-run TV series called Tenchi Muyo which

chronicles the misadventures of a young man named Tenchi Masaki who has unwittingly gained the attention and affections of five powerful women... Six now, if you include Ryo-Ohki.”

Washu raised an eyebrow. “Pretty smooth delivery there. How long have you been working on it?”

“Honestly, I'm kinda surprised myself. Are you sure you haven't fiddled around with anything else in my brain?”

“I assure you I haven't. Anyhow, if it weren't for you being plugged into all my medical diagnostic equipment I'd say you're lying to me. But you're not. And even if you could fake that somehow, I have other methods. But you can't, so I won't resort to it.”

“So, what happens now?” I asked.

“Good question. We don't exactly have room for you here unless you started living up in the shrine. Pretty sure old man Yosho's got a few extra rooms there.”

“Sure, have me just stay put. I'm pretty sure I can pull my own weight around here by fixing the tractor whenever it breaks down. Oh wait, there's no tractor.”

“Quit being so passive aggressive. Really, what did you have going for yourself back home?”

I sighed. “I was taking an aerospace engineering program at a prestigious university back in the USA. But my mother wound up passing away and I lost my job, which killed my tuition, which killed my education, so I had to start over again.”

“Surely you could have transferred your credits over to another school,” said Washu.

“Sure, but the last semester is shot – I've lost those credits. And then there's the whole new-school bit that I wasn't looking forward to – you know, adjusting to the new staff, new curriculum, new schedules and new settings... It's all just a real punch to the gut after everything else I've been through – you know the drama, who gets the family bible and whatnot. I just count myself lucky since everything I own is in my truck.” I suddenly had a horrifying thought and asked, “My stuff is still intact, isn't it?”

Washu p-shawed. “Of course it is. I just shifted it all here into the lab so it'd be safe.”

I breathed a sigh of relief at that. “Thanks, you have no idea how much that means to me. Some of the stuff in there... it just cannot be replaced. I mean... computers and electronics, sure. No problem... but a picture of me with my sister and all my cousins when we were little, sitting with my grandparents...”

Washu smiled. “Yeah, something like that you can't put a price on.”

“No, you can't.”

Washu sighed. “Well, at any rate I know that Tenchi will be glad to have a truck around here and someone to drive it.”

I snorted. “As if I could take it out on the roads here.”

“You might be surprised,” said Washu as she handed me my wallet. Perplexed, I opened it up... And found a Japanese driver's license. “WHAT.”

“We also found an American passport with your visas all in order, a Japanese resident alien card, and your truck has the proper plates and inspections. Even your road tax is all paid-up.”

“Oh, c'mon! You seriously mean that you didn't do all this?”

“Nope,” said Washu artlessly. “Honest promise! I did not hack any government systems and I did not make any false paperwork and/or IDs.”

“Well if you didn't then who did?”

“Not anyone here,” she said matter-of-factly. “I'd have noticed.”

“Well fuck. Washu, we got a ROB.”

“A rob?” she parroted.

I nodded. “A Random Omnipotent Being.”

And now she scowled. “So that's how it is then?”

I nodded. “That's how it is.”

“... Garrick, with your permission I would like to fit you with a device that will let me track you wherever you are, even if you get sent to another universe. I'll even give you a communication device so you'll have some kind of life line in the event you do get transported again. Do you agree?”

“No argument here, Doc. I'll take every advantage I can get.”

Washu performed the procedure with little fanfare. A simple injection was all it took. As for the communication device, it came in the form of something like my 5th generation iPod Nano on a wristband. The coolest part about it was the tiny little dimensional pocket it had – just big enough to carry the earpieces. I would never lose a headset again.

The maraschino cherry on top was that it was disguised as an iPod Nano... complete with the music playback functions. It even worked with my iTunes software, only I could put as much music as I wanted on there. Sweet!

On the downside, my iPhone was all but useless. The first generation iPods were just debuting in this time period, so my iPhone working here was right out.

As for my rooming issues... Washu assured me that could be worked out. I'd hoped she was serious on that matter.

What happened next was like a scene straight out of a manga. Everyone was gathered for a traditional Japanese breakfast and they all staring at me with fascination despite the delicious smell of fish, miso soup and rice hanging in the air.

This felt more like the introduction of a new student in a Japanese school.

“Okay everyone!” said Washu cheerfully. “As you all know we have a new visitor that will be staying with us for a while. Now, I know that when he first arrived it gave everyone quite a scare, but thanks to my superior medical technology, he's as good as new. So, I would like you all to meet Garrick Grimm.”

I mentally shrugged and then bowed to the company of the Tenchi Household seated at the table before me.

“A pleasure to make your acquaintance. Please take good care of me.”

“Great!” chirped Washu. “Sasami prepared an extra spot for you there at the end of the table. Get yourself situated. Now, does anyone have any questions for our visitor?”

“What can you do around the house?” asked Ayeka as I settled in, followed quickly by Washu. That seemed to be the signal for everyone to dig in. I shrugged at Ayeka as I picked up my chopsticks and get them properly positioned in my fingers.

“Pretty much anything,” I said as I began to dig into the roasted fish. In Japan it wasn't considered impolite to converse during a meal, so long as you didn't have your chopsticks in your mouth as you did so. “Being the oldest out of all but one among my generation in my family, I had to learn how to do a myriad of tasks. I do dishes, laundry, windows, carpets, hardwood, bedding, cooking (as long as I have a recipe to go by), and I can even balance the checkbook and the budget. I can also fix things. I can replace windows and doors, patch walls, paint, hang pictures, as well as repair, replace, and even install electrical and plumbing fixtures. My technical skills are not to be overlooked, either. I can troubleshoot and repair computers (of Earth origin), or even build one out of parts, with your choice of Apple, Windows, or Linux operating systems (sometimes even combinations of any). I can even set up home theater systems. I'm also a shadetree mechanic. I do all my own maintenance on my pickup truck, from oil changes and tire rotation all the way down to engine overhauls and transmission rebuilds. I have also been military trained as a maintenance technician, munitions

handler, hazardous materials manager, firefighter, security sentry, and safety watch. And yes, I know how to use a gun, and I'm not too shabby at it.

“Oh, and I know first aid for trauma, cardiopulmonary resuscitation, and the Heimlich Maneuver.”

Everyone blinked at me. I just smiled back as I sampled the miso soup.

“Okay, we're keeping him,” said Ryoko.

“Do you like the miso soup?” asked Sasami, her having caught my eyes rolling into the back of my head as I savored it. She seemed to realize, though, that the question might as well have been rhetorical. So, she then asked, “What kinds of food do you like?”

I grinned. “It's been so long since I've had really good miso, it was almost a shock to my system. Anyhow, I have been called a human garbage disposal in the past. While I may not eat as much in one sitting as some might, I will pack away more food over time than most. And I'll eat just about anything, as long as it's not alive and is safe for human consumption. Although I will say this: I hate wasabi and horseradish. Bleagh!”

“Oh! Thank you for saying so,” Sasami replied happily. “It shouldn't be a problem, Mr. Grimm.”

“So, where do you come from Mr. Grimm?” asked Mihoshi.

“I'm from the United States of America – on the northern continent east of the Pacific Ocean.”

“Oh? An American?” said Ayeka with interest. “I've heard about your people. Is it true that you always get drunk and make a lot of noise?”

I shrugged as I dug into my rice. “Some do. A lot don't. I won't say the stereotype isn't deserved, but many of us despise the people that earned it for us. Really, a lot of us are as normal as can be. Our culture just differs because we have no issues with looking people in the eye.”

“That's something I've never really understood,” said Tenchi. “I mean no offense, Mr. Grimm, but why do you your people do that?”

I shrugged. “For us, it's sort of like acknowledging the other person. Of course, the trick is not to stare... unless you want their attention. It's sort of like knowing exactly how deep your bow should be.”

“So... it's like greeting everyone you see?”

“Pretty much. Granted, a lot less of it happens in the really busy cities, like New York or Los Angeles. Another reason, though, is trust.”

“Trust? How so?” asked Ayeka.

“Have you ever noticed that someone that is hiding something from you has trouble looking you in the eye?”

“Oh... why, yes! I see what you mean, now. You confront people immediately to determine if they're trustworthy. But even so, isn't that a bit rude?”

I shook my head. “It's a holdover from our frontier days. If you came across somebody back then, you wanted to be sure they weren't going to pull something on you because you could literally be hundreds of miles from any sort of help. And, as you know, old habits die hard.

“But at any rate, I think the most important things to keep in mind about us Americans is that even though we can be ill-tempered and ill-mannered at times, we tend to be fiercely loyal to our friends. We often put ourselves into danger for each other. Sometimes we even do it for people we don't even know.”

“Ahh... you certainly seem to know how to use chopsticks,” said Mihoshi nervously.

“Thanks. It took me a while to get it just right. I've had a few years experience just trying it on my own. Then I came to Japan while I was in the Navy, and a girlfriend I had there taught me the proper way.”

“You had a girlfriend?” remarked Sasami. “Here in Japan?”

I chuckled. “The Japan of my world, yes. Though she might exist in this world as well... but she'd probably be too young. In my world, she was five years younger than me – it was okay because I was thirty and she was twenty-five. But here? She'd be about fifteen, sixteen years old. Very inappropriate, don't you think Sasami-chan?”

“Oh, but that's so sad,” pouted the cyan-haired cook.

“It wouldn't work out regardless,” I sighed. “At the time, I was more in love with the ideal than with her.”

“What ideal?”

I sighed. “Oh, a sweet and loving wife that does everything she can because she loves you with all her heart. Someone with those Japanese eyes that are so exotic by American standards. The grace and the beauty of the yamato nadeshiko. Someone whose faith in their husband is backed not just by their love, but by the cultural mores of a warrior society. Someone that, once I ask for her honest and unabashed opinion of me and how I do things, will give me a straight answer even if it hurts me to hear it.

“It also doesn't hurt that I saw geisha on an educational program when I was very young... I thought they were the prettiest women I had ever seen.”

I smiled as I noticed that Sasami had gone all googly-eyed. “Earth to Sasami. Come in Space Cadet Masaki!”

Sasami blushed as she came back to us and I laughed. “Don't worry, Sasami, it will come to you eventually.” I then sighed. “You're all very lucky, you know that?”

“What do you mean?”

“If all of you play your cards right... you won't have to have your hearts broken over and over again like I have.”

“Speak for yourself,” grumbled Washu.

“Yeah, well the light at the end of your tunnel isn't an express train this time around.” Washu snickered and shook her head. “Look... Tenchi, I don't know what Washu has told you guys, but I'm literally someone who's been on the outside looking in. Don't bother asking why or how – it's too complicated to explain and it will only give you guys migraines. But I know that you've got room in your heart for all these wonderful girls. You just need the time it takes to realize that love. Though in the meantime, I'd highly suggest you make a trip to Jurai at some point in time here and see if one of those trees in the Royal Nursery doesn't take a shine to you. Because at the rate you're going you're gonna look as old as your grandfather before it finally hits you.”

You could hear a pin drop in that place. I simply polished off the last of my rice, leaving a clean bowl on my place setting.

“Thank you kindly for the delicious meal. If you folks would be so kind as to excuse me, I'm going to go for a run – been laying around in a bed for too damn long.”

The hills that surrounded Tenchi's home were anything but an urban landscape... but that meant nothing to a free-runner.

Known also as Parkour, free-running is a fun, fast-paced sort of running that focuses entirely on getting from point-A to point-B in as much of a straight line as possible, no matter what obstacle is in your way.

It was also very physically demanding – an energy intensive workout that taxed every part of the body. For someone whose favorite parts about childhood was climbing trees, this was ideal.

I had only been doing it for about a year and a half. I was... decent. I'm not as flashy as some of the people you might see on youtube... but what I lacked in flair I more than made up for in speed. I usually would go by so quickly that the only response elicited was a fervent WTF.

The grounds of the Masaki estate and shrine were beautiful beyond compare. The only thing I had in my memories that came close was the Olympic Rain Forest of Washington State.

Having my music available to me just made it all the better.

After a few minutes of not-too-much-fussing with my computer, the C-Pod, as I had taken to calling it, now had my entire music library on it, fully arranged as I had it on my computer. As I ran, jumped, and swung through the woods, I enjoyed the sounds of one of my Movement playlists.

Was I bothered that I was here?

A little bit.

But I had to admit, I had gotten off pretty damn easily. I was at a point in my life where I was completely free. Mother was gone, Father, and my brothers barely talk between us, and so there were no more family obligations. My job had been taken away from me, and the school had expelled me.

I was still heartbroken, though. I still wanted to raise a family of my own, and be able to introduce my children to the wonderful person that would be their grandmother. And now... it seems that I'm forced to let it all go completely.

I had no delusions about the matter. I wasn't going to go back. This place would change me on many levels; obvious, subtle, and profound all at the same time. No one would recognize me... not that it mattered. Few people ever did since I was always away.

Away from San Antonio, the home that I had known as a child, doted on by my grandparents, aunts, and uncles while I played with my cousins.

Away from my brothers as they came into their own as adults and became their own people.

Away from my only sister as she had children of her own, went through her own trials by fire, and came out of it a strong and independent woman.

But more importantly... always alone.

I wasn't entirely fine with that. Sure, I had my anti-social tendencies, especially as a child. Anyone that wasn't family (and even then there was Mom and then there was God) had no business telling me what to do.

But I knew after long experience, being alone sucked. Sure, being out amongst the people in the city was nice. It gave a false sense of not really being alone. But I would take having a few close friends over that any day of the week. In fact, the best times of my life were spent that way – a few close friends, going out, exploring the lesser known hidden corners of civilization.

But could I have that same experience here?

Somehow, during my cool-down walk, I had found my way to the little island in the lake where Yoshio's Tree, Funaho, had taken root. Knowing that she wouldn't mind, I jumped and began to shimmy my way up into the boughs of the great tree. It was Autumn here and, despite the fact that it was drawing on noon time, the crisp, cool air was rapidly pulling the sweat off my body. I decided to lean against a comfortable branch and wait until I dried out completely before going back inside. I wouldn't smell as bad that way.

“Point in your favor: Funaho seems to like you.”

I looked down to the ground and saw Washu standing below, look up at me with a grin. It suddenly struck me exactly just how much like an impish little girl Washu really seemed like. The anime and manga simply did not do her justice.

I grinned back at her. “She is a magnificent tree. I wish there had been more like her when I was growing up. In Texas we had mostly Pecan trees, but they were all big seventy-footers. The

lowest branches were two stories off the ground. And in Washington State we had Redwood Pines. No climbing those suckers without special equipment – I was definitely too small for lineman's boots.”

“Be interesting to see, I bet,” replied the little scientist.

“Oh, I bet. I would have jumped at the chance, too.” I looked down again and smiled at Washu. “You know what I always loved about you whenever I read the Manga or watched the TV series?”

“Do tell.”

“20,000 years old, and you still cling to that wonderfully child-like spirit... even if it is every bit as mischievous as I used to be.”

“Aw, geeze, you're gonna make an old woman blush.”

I laughed. “Sorry. Just calling it as I see it. So, how badly did I shake everyone up?”

“It was food for thought for all of them,” Washu admitted. “Me as well. I just hope that the rest of them don't get carried away.”

“Washu-chan, it's a given. They'll go overboard with this just like everything else.”

The pink-haired girl sighed. “Yeah, your right. But then it'd be pretty boring regardless.”

“Even so, I think it would be best if I helped Tenchi.”

“Oh? What do you have in mind?”

“Well, it's pretty obvious no one's ever taught him how to deal with womanly attention. Kiyone passed away before she could teach him anything about that sort of thing, and Noboyuki has been more than useless on the matter.”

“And Yosho is just plain useless,” added Washu.

I shrugged. “He teaches Tenchi swordsmanship. That counts for something. But evidence against him in that matter exists. He did, after all, run from that perfectly wonderful little lady Ayeka.”

Washu snorted. “I'd hardly go that far.”

“She's got a good heart. Sasami would be a very different person if she didn't.”

“True,” Washu allowed. “But then, Yosho simply didn't love her that way.”

“He did love somebody. We wouldn't have Tenchi around if he didn't. Anyhow, he could have given Tenchi advice at some point in time. Thus, ground gained by teaching him swordplay is lost by his virtually destructive inaction in neglecting Tenchi's education in the woman's heart. So, yeah. Useless.”

“Agreed,” chirped Washu. I could almost see Yosho doubling-over in pain somewhere. “So, what does the love-doctor have in mind?”

I snorted. “Hardly a love-doctor. Just advice for better interaction with the ladies. And getting it through his head that it's fine to schedule dates for each of them! Godsakes, it shouldn't be a competition, and one date isn't going to seal the deal regardless.”

“Well, this is all well and good for Tenchi, but what about you?”

“What about me?” I asked, arching an eyebrow.

“Tenchi can't have all the fun now. So what about you?”

I sighed, feeling the heaviness in my gut once more. “I've been alone for a long time, Washu-chan. I can stand to go a little bit longer. Besides, bad things happen to those that poach on Lord Tenchi's turf. It's a law of this universe.”

“Are you serious?”

“Deadly.”

Washu snorted. “Alright, fine then. But it's not like Tenchi is gonna get every girl in the world.”

“Don't tempt Murphy. He's a cold-hearted bastard. And no, I know better than that. It's just...”

“Too soon?” asked Washu.

“... Yeah. Too soon. Too much hurting. If I get a girl's attention now it's going to be like Sasami – poor Grimm-kun and all that.”

“M'yeah. That pity thing really wouldn't sit well. Though it's cute coming from Sasami.”

I smiled a little. “Yeah. She's such a sweetheart. Tenchi had better watch out for that one once she gets older. She's already got Ryoko and Ayeka running scared.”

“Can't expect anything less of her, after all she is... Well, you know about Tsunami, right?”

“Yeah. There's been a lot of conjecture about their relationship. A lot of people think that she actually is Tsunami after that incident on Jurai.”

“Pretty apt description. Close enough, really. So, you gonna come down or do I gotta send Ryoko in their after ya?”

“Now why would you do that to poor Funaho here?” I teased back. “She doesn't deserve that sort of treatment.”

“Just get down here. I got something to show you!”

“Alright, Ahm a-comin', Ahm a-comin',” I mock-grumbled as I swung myself out of Funaho's boughs.

Washu led me back to the house, up the stairs, and to a door that didn't exist earlier.

“Is this what I think it is?” I asked.

“Why don'tcha see for yourself,” replied the tiny mad genius with a grin.

I leveled a suspicious glare at her, but the look I was getting back was an impish 'you're never gonna find out if you don't open that door yourself' look. So, with an irritated sigh, I reached for the doorknob and gave it a turn.

Oddly enough, the C-pod pulsed on my wrist as the latch clicked, allowing the door to glide open on silent hinges.

It was an empty room.

Just that and nothing more. The floor was bare concrete as were the walls and ceiling. The room was somehow ambiently lit without a direct source of light. Of course, it could be coming from the very walls themselves.

“I thought it would be more impressive than this,” I said absently.

Washu shrugged. “Honestly, I could have pulled some kind of gag, but I figured you're not quite ready for that yet.”

“Thanks for that,” I replied, giving the scientist a wry look. “So, pocket universe?”

“Yup.”

“Integral life support and all that?”

“He's on a roll again. What else?”

“Just how tough did you make this door?” I asked.

“It's about as strong as mine. Nothing short of Tsunami herself is getting through it.”

“Ah. So I have a place to hide from Ryoko and Ayeka... Mihoshi may be another issue entirely.”

Washu groaned at the reminder.

“You know, if you figure out how Mitoto does it-”

Another groan.

I shrugged and went on. “So, I take it there's a way to change up things in here?”

“Of course,” replied Washu, brightening right away at the prospect of teaching someone. “Take a look at the options on your C-pod.”

I raised an eyebrow, but otherwise did as requested. Interestingly enough, there was a new icon in the home screen titled “C-Space”. I gave the icon a tap and jumped when a holographic image of a cube with a white rectangle centered on the bottom edge appeared, hovering right in front of my face.

“Ahh! So you like to peek and poke, too!” said Washu. “Wonderful! You’ll find that it’s pretty intuitive, but all the same you should probably read the manual.”

“What manual?” I asked. Suddenly the hologram changed into an image of a not-unreasonably sized book – it was about the same size and look of a Haynes Automotive Manual, bore an image of my C-Pod beaming a projection of an open door, and was titled “Washu-chan’s C-Space User’s Manual”.

“Nice,” I said emphatically as I took the manual in my hands and began to page through it. “Full range tactile response – even feels like real paper. You even included a feature to disguise it as something else so as not to raise any suspicions. Clever.”

“Of course, of course,” preened Washu. “Nothing is too clever for the greatest genius in the galaxy!”

I looked down at Washu and snorted, scruffing that pink head of hers.

“Hey!”

“Well, if you’re gonna wear the twelve-year-old body, then you get the twelve-year-old treatment... Washu-chaaaaannn.”

Washu could only moan in a way that indicated that she was stuck somewhere between wanting to hurt me and wanting to glomp me.

I pretty much spent the rest of the afternoon studying the manual. Part of me wanted to get Scrappy unloaded so I could help Tenchi, but if I was going to do that then I needed a place for everything to go. And that meant learning how to reconfigure my space however I wanted or needed.

It turns out that the C-Space was very flexible.

The maximum amount of available space was... well, huge. To draw comparisons, I had roughly the same amount of volume available to me as a Nimitz-class aircraft carrier... rounded up to a suitably round figure, of course. And of course, I could have it in whatever shape I wanted.

As for actually forming the spaces, it was as simple as drawing them. I had a virtual toolbox that allowed me to do a myriad of things such as make walls, windows, doors, electrical outlets, plumbing fixtures, and so on and so forth. I could even make additional doors and windows that led to the outside, and there was also a huge assortment of preset textures and colors.

And as I learned, I began to mess around with it. Right away, I set the ceiling to a lofty fourteen foot clearance so I would at last have a room spacious enough to accommodate my loft bed without my needing to hunch over in the slightest.

A sleeping area is supposed to be just that – a place of rest. And therefore, it should be as such. No computers, no TVs, none of those distractions, period. However, I did want it to remain a part of my space. Sure, I could have partitioned the actual bedroom off in a separate room in my C-Space, but that wouldn’t work for me. The C-Space all on its own provided me with all the privacy I could want. And I wanted anyone that I invited in to feel the sense that I was not simply inviting them into a different room of the house, but a place that was without any doubt my home.

That said, I decided to partition off the sleeping area with a heavy draw-curtain. That way, when it was time for sleep I could draw the curtain and shut out the distractions, but in my waking hours I could leave it open and inviting.

After that, I decided on a full-blown Japanese-style bath... but not the fixtures. You see, I love the way the Japanese do things. You scrub down first, rinse, and then have a nice long soak. For sanitary reasons, the sink area and the toilet area all get their own spaces – usually adjacent but always

separate. But fixtures.... My formative years were spent in my grandfather's and great-grandfather's houses... and they had the most wonderfully dated fixtures going as far back as the 1940's, where sinks, toilets and bathtubs were mammoth, blocky things – always in the most gorgeous egg shell white – and handsome chrome features, again in that big blocky style.

I don't know why, but I have always loved it. Maybe it's just because it exuded a sense of tasteful masculinity. I could almost hear the deep baritone of Brian Blessed booming in my head, “Here there be a Man's Bathroom. Respect is appreciated, but fear of breaking anything is unwarranted.”

So, my bathroom had no sweeping, graceful curves, except where demanded by such things where water was directly involved. It was all right angles and forty-fives, with just the bare minimum of rounding out.

The tub, while the inner walls were smooth and comfortable to lie against, was a massive slab-sided affair.

The sink; a tall and proud pedestal sink with separate hot and cold water faucets and a true basin that can honestly be used for a bathroom sink's primary purpose: the grooming of the face.

And the toilet... a massive commode that would never clog no matter what the circumstance. High-volume and high-flow were the buzzwords here. The amount of water used mattered little – it was all recycled in the C-Space system. That aside, the massive flow was better for the plumbing anyhow.

Eventually, I got away from the bathroom and back to the rest of the space in general.

I decided on a nice ceramic tile floor – so much easier to maintain – with a rich, dark brown color of stone. Area rugs of various patterns helped with insulation of both sound and temperature. The walls I made eggshell white with a smooth, matte texture. I would hang pictures and such later.

I added a kitchenette. It was small, as the title implies, but it was comfortably appointed with all the amenities of a larger kitchen... just smaller.

I added a 'balcony floor' that overlooked the 'common area' and lined it with inset bookshelves and curio cabinets running from floor to ceiling. Having room for more books would never be a problem for me anymore.

Then there was the garage and workshop. Everything I needed – vehicle lift, gantry crane with light- and heavy-duty hoists, welding table, work bench, soldering station... It wouldn't let me create all the tools I needed – just the really big ones. The rest would come in time, as I knew they would with an engineering-type like me. Although, I was surprised to see that one option was a rapid prototyper. Knowing just how endlessly useful that would be I went for it right away.

And that was pretty much it.

I had arranged the library over the bathroom and kitchen area, with a railing overlooking the lounge. My hobby area was adjacent to the library and sat over the sleeping area. The garage and shop space was on the other side and could be accessed from both levels.

“What are you doing, Grimm-san?”

“Huh?” I said coherently as I looked up and saw a cerulean head with fuchsia eyes blinking curiously at me. “Oh! Hey Sasami-san.”

“You can call me Sasami-chan,” she said with a smile. “Everyone else here does.”

I smiled back. “Well, in that case you can just call me Gar-kun.”

Sasami's smile then went to her eyes. “Thanks! I will!”

I chuckled indulgently – she was adorable! “As for what I've been doing, well... Washu-chan gave me a space much like her lab... only nowhere nearly as big.”

“How big?”

“Well... Big enough to fit several Ryo-Ohki ships inside it.”

“Why would Washu-chan give you so much space?”

I shrugged. “Just in case something happens.”

Sasami made a thoughtful sound, then nodded as she accepted that at face value – small wonder considering that 'just in case' can be just around the corner in this place.

“So, what will you do now, Gar-kun?”

I shrugged. “Just help out I guess. I have a license to drive, and I have my truck. I guess I can help Tenchi out with the field work that way. Also, I think Tenchi can use a big brother.”

“Why?”

I grinned mischievously. “Because, you adorable little imp, shoujo manga is not how real relationships work.”

Sasami chuckled nervously. “Uhm, how do you know about that?”

“Outside looking in, remember?”

“How?”

“You sure you really want to know? It's kinda scary. It's even kinda scary for Tsunami-sama.”

“Then I gotta know!”

“Okay, okay, settle yourself down, cute stuff. Hate to have to see you redo those pigtailed of yours. Anyhow, you know those TV programs you and the others like to watch?” Sasami nodded.

“Well, imagine that you could somehow get into one of those shows with everything that you know about what happens there.” Sasami gasped as the implication hit her. She was cute, and maybe a little naïve, but she was by no means stupid.

“That's what you did!?” she cried out in amazement.

“That's what happened to me,” I corrected her soberly. “While I always thought it would be fun to meet you guys, I never really wanted to... for it to be like this.”

“What do you mean?”

I sighed and shook my head. “I know it's kinda silly Sasami-chan, but I feel like some sort of spy that's become a refugee in the very country he was spying on.”

“But you're not a spy, Gar-kun!” replied the blue-haired girl suddenly. “You were just someone that liked a TV show... and some meanie put you here.”

“And what about everything I know?”

“I don't think you're a bad person, Gar-kun. You won't do anything to hurt us.”

I shook my head again and sighed. “I haven't always been a nice person, Sasami-chan. I'm worried I might... slip.”

“I don't care. I love Big Sister Ayeka even though she does mean things sometimes. And I even like Ryoko even though she did terrible things in the past.

I smiled, but I knew it was a wane looking one. “Sasami... I can appreciate that. I know because I have brothers back... where I came from. They... were neglectful. They hardly ever supported me when I needed it the most. I couldn't do anything – couldn't go to school, could barely hold down a job... we couldn't even make the budget work. We were always falling behind and any windfalls we came into went into repaying debts just to keep the lights on and the water running. I tried my hardest to support them, but all it really did was hurt me. They were apathetic towards me, and it took them a long time to realize that I would not be around forever.”

I was rambling, I know, but with something like this it was like opening the floodgates – kinda hard to stop once I started. Sasami, though, didn't seem to care one bit. She was giving me her undivided attention.

“What did you do?” she asked with sad looking eyes.

“I laid down the law. I told them that once my obligation to my parents had been fulfilled that they would be on their own, and nothing they could say or do would change my mind. It was only then

they saw how badly I was being held back. It was slow at first, but eventually they started taking care of themselves – just in time for us all to go our separate ways. That was about three years ago.”

“What happened then?”

I shrugged. “We all drifted apart. We suck at correspondence, so we didn't even really keep in touch with each other. The only person that really did was... Mom.” God, it still hurt to think of her, to know that she was gone. It didn't even help to think that she was in a better place because the belief system I was raised on said that we would all be together someday.

The thing is that I had been cast off into the wilderness – a different universe, with different rules and different powers that ruled over them. What became of a lost soul like myself when my end finally comes?

I will admit now, I was raised as a Mormon... and us Mormons have an interesting take on Hell. It was not so much being cast into 'The Pit' with all the other damned souls to be tortured by demons for eternity.

It was worse than that.

It was being cut off from the light of God, the one that gave life to the Universe itself... to be completely shut-off from that, and cast away forever in the darkness. Utterly alone and cold until...
...Oblivion.

Am I in Hell?

“DON'T THINK THAT!” came Sasami's voice suddenly... or was that Tsunami's? I had no way to tell for sure, but I do know that suddenly Sasami threw her arms around me and damn near broke out into tears. “You're not alone anymore, Gar-kun. And I don't want you to feel alone anymore. If Gar-kun needs a family, then I will be his little sister!”

I was absolutely floored. For one thing, there was the simple physical sensation of nearly being tackle-glomped by this little barely-a-teenager, feeling her force the sobs back into her body because she didn't want to cry.

And then there was the fact that she was honestly and truly sad for me. This was no pseudo-sympathetic 'you have my condolences because propriety demands it' thing. This poor little girl, cursed with a heart so big it gave a Goddess pause for consideration, felt true sorrow for me.

I was all but a stranger, and yet she felt so bad for me that she wanted me to be part of her family, just so I wouldn't feel alone anymore.

I gently wrapped my arms around Sasami and hugged her back.

“It's okay to cry a little now and then, even when you're trying to be strong.”

“How can you be strong and cry at the same time?” asked Sasami in a strained whisper.

“We do it in private mostly,” I told her. “Where no one can see us. But sometimes... like now... it's okay to do it quietly... Where the people we care about very much can see us... my beloved little sister.”

Sasami froze, then looked me in the eyes. The tears had been stabbing at my eyes for some time now and they had been flowing freely once I realized just how much this sweet little girl cared.

Without another word, Sasami threw herself back into my chest, arms wrapped around me tightly, and began to quietly sob.

Little did I know just how serious she was about her claim.

That evening, life went on as usual in the Masaki household. Tenchi came in from the fields with Ryo-Ohki in tow. Ryoko finally roused herself. Ayeka finished with her household chores. Mihoshi performed one of her infamous crash-landings in the lake. Washu appeared from her lab. And Sasami served dinner.

“How was your day Tenchi?” asked Sasami.

“It was good. It looks like the carrots will be ready to harvest next week.”

“I should have my truck and trailer unpacked by then,” I chimed in. “We'll be able to get the entire harvest in one go.”

Tenchi gave me a surprised look, then beamed. “Thanks! But are you sure your truck can handle all that?”

I shrugged. “It handled all my stuff at highway speeds. Granted, not quite as fast as it normally would, but fast enough for it to be safe. If we can keep Ryo-Ohki from eating the majority of them at once, we might even be able to take some of our harvest to the market.”

“That would be a huge boost to our income,” said Washu. “I knew you'd be useful to keep around.”

“Yeah, well the sort of 'useful' you guys usually need isn't of the handyman variety,” I sniped back. “But anyhow... I just realized that fuel could be an issue – it was bad enough in my time when it started running close to about a hundred-twenty yen a liter. And my truck has a sixty-liter tank. Having another vehicle like my truck around is a boon... but it's also an expense. Washu, think you could help me out on converting my truck into a diesel-electric?”

“Diesel-Electric?” asked Tenchi, a little unfamiliar with the concept.

I sighed. “Of course, most of your locomotives are straight-up electrical. A diesel-electric drive train is one where you have a diesel engine turning a generator which supplies power for electrical traction motors that drive your vehicle. A lot of railroad locomotives in the USA are like this because the runs between rail yards and depots tend to be measured in the hundreds of miles. If you remember your science classes then you'd know that's too far to transmit power efficiently... at least, using regular power lines.

“Now, this is opposed to hybrid drive trains that you hear about in some vehicles because in those the gas engine and the electrical motor do the same work together – driving the car. It's just that in a hybrid system the computer is able to balance how much work the engine does with the motor, and how much work the engine puts into generating electricity instead of providing driving power. It's very complicated and requires a lot of moving parts.

“Now, I'm an engineer, which means I believe perfection is achieved not when there is nothing left to add, but when there is nothing left to take away. I would go for the diesel-electric system – much simpler that way. Also, add a nice little bank of batteries and a couple of one-farad capacitors, and then have those capacitors working in conjunction with some high-efficiency direct-drive dynamos – that way I can reclaim energy whenever I brake to slow down.”

“Pretty clever,” said Washu.

I shrugged. “Wasn't my idea. Someone else came up with it, then slapped a patent on it so only they could make money off it. I'd do it differently – patent it, yes, but make it so anyone can use the basic system, free of charge.”

“You wouldn't make any money off it,” said Washu shrewdly.

“My reward would be when global warming starts to look a lot less like a myth here in the next couple of decades and right-leaning politicians start rethinking their agendas. Oh, and also it'll be nice for when the price of gas skyrockets.”

“Good point,” she conceded. “At any rate, it sounds doable. Though that sort of vibration tolerance is pretty high. You sure Earth's technology is up to snuff at this time?”

“Pretty sure. It may not be in the same class as 'off the shelf parts' but it's out there. We can work out the details later.”

“Good idea. Food now, work later.”

Later on, Washu and I worked at the table once all the food had been cleared away. She had rolled out a largish piece of clear film over the table and engineer's diagrams of my truck appeared all over it. I don't know how she managed to get a hold of it all, but it covered everything about the Mazda B2500 pickups you could imagine.

We got around talking about instrumentation and how it would all have to be changed, I then heaved a sigh as I had an epiphany.

"You know what, I'm not so sure I want to go through this anymore," I said.

"What? Why wouldn't you?" said Washu in surprise.

I shrugged. "I've got a lot of sentimental value in that truck. Kinda like to keep old Scrappy the way he is now."

"You got any other ideas in mind?" asked Washu.

"Well... there is a four-door option of this truck here in Japan. I wouldn't mind trading-off the longer bed in exchange for more comfortable seats in the back."

"You don't have to," said Washu. "We could just get both versions, cut them in half, and keep the parts we want."

"Maybe," I said thoughtfully. "It'd take some time to make it happen. There's a few other options I want to look at as well, like a camper-shell with an air conditioning unit and cargo-bed seating. Not enough seats for everyone otherwise."

"Why's that important?" asked Washu.

"I thought it'd be nice if we can go out on road trips now and then. You know, nice normal stuff. Though if we want the same sort of experiences I had when I was a kid, we'd have to hit everyone with an American Generic language pack and head over to the USA."

Washu snorted. "That'd be something to see. But I think you're onto something about them enjoying it."

"Yeah. I think Ryoko would especially like Texas. And I'm pretty sure that Ayeka and Sasami would like the Riverwalk."

"What about Mihoshi and me?"

"Lots of schools chock full of fresh-faced science and engineering majors for you to terrorize." Washu cackled gleefully at that. "As for Mihoshi... eh, she'd have a blast anywhere. She would probably get lost in the barrios and wind up finding one of those nice hole-in-the-wall panaderias and blow her entire budget on pandejevo and sweet empanadas. And she will never eat any pastries but conchas and cemitas and empanadas afterwards."

"You sure about that?"

"Latin Americans are renowned for their sweet tooth. Just you wait and see."

"And what about Tenchi?"

I grinned. "I'll take him to Lackland Air Force Base. If I look through my stuff, I'll bet that my DD-214's have changed to reflect my shift in time and space accordingly and I can get Tenchi in with just a little bit of effort."

"How so?"

"Whisper into a recruiter's ear that he's considering service in the US Air Force over the JASDF."

And now Washu snickered. "You evil person you."

I grinned and I knew I had that wicked gleam in my eyes. "It's a gift, I know."

After that evening with Washu, I put the finishing touches on my C-Space, and then got myself my sleeping pad, pillow and some blankets, as well as my cat and his basic necessities, then sacked out. It was empty and hollow sounding, but it was my space and tomorrow I was going to fill it.

Moving is always an odd experience.

You cast away the old home and take on a new one.

A new place with new spaces and you have to figure out where to put everything. In this case, I had an advantage in that I made this space with all my belongings in mind – I already knew where I wanted everything to go. But what made this very different was an experience that was completely novel to me: I did not have enough stuff to fill up my space.

I'm used to living in smaller spaces, but I have always wanted something sprawling like I had designed. So I may have gone just a bit overboard. Oh, it wasn't ridiculously huge. It wasn't that it felt like my bed only occupied a small corner of the Dallas Cowboys' stadium. It's more like my sleeping area seemed to have a largish empty spot that my brain quickly tagged as 'big enough to fit a plush leather sofa on one side, a matching loveseat ninety-degrees over, and a coffee table between them'. Rather, it did so with the image of such instead.

As I assembled my bed, a strange, yet familiar voice rang out, echoing in my still mostly empty C-Space.

“So, you catch the interest of a galactically renowned scientist, gain the liking of First-Generation Royal Tree, and steal the heart of my granddaughter. What am I to do with such a strange person?”

I turned, blinked in shock, and said, “Holy shit, you're Seto Kamiki Jurai.”

And there she was, giving me a bemused smile. Mint green hair, intensely wavy, pulled into a long ponytail, save for some truly gravity defying bangs that framed her narrow, wine-red eyes. I had to admit, she was a very attractive woman. The white-sleeved purple robe with a tightly cinched black sash and a white ankle-length skirt did little to hide her hourglass figure.

Especially her bust. Boggle!

“Oh, not going to use that 'Devil Princess of Jurai' title?” Seto asked coyly.

I raised an eyebrow and replied, “Does a man tell a fire-breathing dragon she's ugly?”

Seto chuckled. “Charming. I can see why the others like you. You don't just run and hide like Tenchi does. You fire back.”

“Well, I must admit that part of me is screaming at the rest of me to take tactical cover. But the other part says that she'll just nuke me from high orbit if I do that.”

Now it was Seto's turn to raise a speculative eyebrow. “Now why would I do that?”

“Because I just might make myself too dangerous to allow running loose.” I then shrugged as I gave it more thought. “Then again, you are the sort to keep us 'potentially dangerous' types closer than your 'friends'. Just please don't try to marry me off to someone. I may be lonely, but I'm not ready. Just ask Washu-chan.”

“She told me all about it,” Seto reassured me. “Don't worry, that's not on the table right now.”

My eyebrow went up like a flag again. “Right now, she says. Twelve months later, you'll be setting me up with Minaho.”

“Oh?” said Seto, as though catching wind of something tasty. “Why Minaho?”

I shrugged. Don't worry, it's not all I did – I was just resigned to my fate there and then.

“I think she's cute and I might as well make my preference known now. Dunno if she'd like me though. I got a nasty streak in me and it rears it's ugly head when I get pissed. You're best bet is to arm me up, aim me at someone particularly nasty, and say, 'Sic 'em, boy.'”

Seto actually looked a bit sour about that. “Is that really necessary?”

I sighed. “Sorry about that,” I apologized sheepishly. “Just a bit of that nasty streak I mentioned. I'm kinda passive-aggressive.”

“So I see,” she replied with a rueful smile. “Look, before you start to get silly with me, young man, why don't we sit down and talk?”

I looked around glumly. “Well, I apologize I don't have any seats to offer you, so I guess we can go to the den. But! I insist on making a pot of tea.”

“As you wish, Mr. Grimm.”

“That's a nice fragrance,” Seto said as I set the tray with a steaming pot and empty cups down in front of her.

“The tea masters that made it call it 'Sleepy Time', but I like it for more than just that. I figure I should calm my nerves anyhow. Try it with a bit of this wildflower honey. It's good enough without it, but just a bit of sweetness really brings out the flavors.”

“Thank you. Would you do the honors?”

“As you wish.” I poured the tea, added the honey, and gave it to Seto before serving myself.

“This is nice. I can see why they call it Sleepy Time. Would you mind if I took some back with me?”

“I can spare a few teabags. Your best bet, though, is to sneak onto one of the larger US Military bases with a fake ID and pick some up at the Commissary. That, or go straight to the US for it. Probably less troublesome that way anyhow.”

“I would appreciate your gift. This would be the best after a particularly stressful day... Not that those happen very often these days.”

I had to grin at that. “Yes, you being the master manipulator and all. Seriously, my hat is off to you. Not many people, even those with enhanced lifespans like yours, become as good at pulling the strings as you do.”

“Well now,” said Seto with a smile. “I don't know whether to be flattered or insulted.”

I gave her my patented 'Pull the other one, it has bells on it' look, and said, “You do it, usually, with the best intentions in mind. Though I gotta admit, getting your husband to marry you because you'll kill him otherwise... that's something else. Your kind is certainly rare and I wish there were more of you around.”

Seto actually looked disturbed by the idea. “Oh dear Tsunami no! It'd be chaos!”

I laughed. That evil look was there, I just knew it. “I know, right? It would be so epic! Fifty Xanatos Pile-Ups left and right!”

“Xanatos?” she queried.

“A fictional character from my home timeline that was known for being a magnificent bastard – manipulating the other characters so that just when they think they got one over on him, they really just played into his hands. His plots were what came to be known as Xanatos Gambits, and a collision of multiple Xanatos Gambits by different characters was known as a Fifty Xanatos Pile-up. You know, like a cascading traffic accident on a superhighway.”

Seto shook her head bemusedly. “You certainly like exposition.”

I shrugged. “I have long felt that Raven is my totem animal.”

“And that means?”

Seto does not know Earth cultures, I had to remind myself.

“Incessantly chatty, ever observant, smart, clever, devious, and one hellacious mean streak. Magnificent birds, really. They make wonderful and loyal companions if you can ever get one to take a shine to you, but unfortunately they're protected by federal law in the US.”

“Pity. But then, I doubt their laws apply to me. Maybe I should go see if one does take a liking to me. Mikagami could use the company.”

I chuckled. "Just don't bring in anything shiny if you don't want it to get snatched – unless that's your intention in the first place. Ravens love shiny stuff."

"Duly noted," said Seto bemusedly. "You know what, I think I do like you, Garrick. However, ever since the whole fiasco with Lady Funaho we are understandably leery of adopting another human into our family."

I blinked. "Sasami doesn't kid around, does she?"

Seto's smile got a bit bigger. "No, she doesn't. The little darling. I hope that someday she'll be able to fill my shoes."

I smiled and shook my head. "Somehow, I don't doubt that. That adorable little imp."

"At any rate, if you are going to join our family, Garrick, you will need to ostensibly prove your worth to the rest of the politicians on Jurai."

I glowered at Seto. "You should know that I don't suffer politicians very well."

"Oh? And what about me?"

"You're different. You actually act with the interests of your people in mind... granted, your people are the Royal Family, but seeing as yours aren't a bunch of tyrants I can let that slide."

"And if we were?"

"I'd play along, get myself into a suitable position of power within the Royal Household, and then stab everyone that deserves it in the back."

"Well, you were right about being devious and mean. Anyhow, Funaho-no-ki, that is Yosho's Tree, wanted you to have this." she then hold her hand out, and in it was a tiny, round, brown-colored, acorn-like object.

"That... is a seed..." I said slowly.

"It is," replied Seto. I could swear she had canary feathers on her face.

"From a first-generation tree..." I looked up in here eyes and said, "I don't deserve this."

"I only need you to take care of it for a while, Garrick. If word got out that there was a Royal Tree here on Earth that was able to produce seeds then there would be no end to the trouble that could cause us – even if that information was restricted within the Council Chamber."

I blinked. "They would demand that Yosho return to Jurai... and you wouldn't do that to him because he likes it here – it would break his heart." I then gave her sidelong look. "And entrusting this seed to me would be a perfect way for you to test my character."

"Garrick, please," sighed Seto, giving me an exasperated look, "just accept this for now. I don't know of anyone else more convenient than you right now. Ayeka has her seedling. Sasami-chan... doesn't need one. And Tenchi... We have plans for him."

I sighed. "Alright, alright, you got me. I'll take care of the little one." I held out my hand and Seto gently placed the seed in my palm. I looked down at the tiny thing, so innocuous looking.

"It's strange," I said, "How something so small can, with time and nurturing, growing into something as great and powerful as Funaho."

"We are all like that, Garrick," placing a hand gently on my shoulder.

"Yes. I suppose we are." For some reason I felt some kind of whim overtake me and I looked Seto in the eyes. "May I name this one?"

Seto tilted her head in mild puzzlement and said, "I suppose it would be alright."

I looked back down to the seed and thought about it for only a brief moment.

"Your name will be Katherine," I said at length. "Yours is to be intelligence, cunning, beauty and grace fit for royalty."

"A laudable goal," said Seto appreciatively. "Do you think she will be up to it?"

I looked back over to Seto and smiled again. "This is one of Funaho's. She will be."

"At least you show some wisdom despite being so young."

I scoffed sheepishly and looked away. “I know. I must seem like such a child... but that is what makes us Earth people so special. Our lives are so brief that we can feel them flickering and burning away like a candle in the wind. And so, with that sense of urgency behind us, we push so hard for a better tomorrow, because for us nothing ever comes soon enough.”

“That is why I accepted Funaho into the family. I knew that she would shake things up a bit, and she did. And now here I am, considering accepting another human, this time one of you infamous Americans. I wonder how much you will shake things up?”

I looked over at Seto and smiled. “Like throwing rocks in a pond and seeing what sort of ripples you make. But just you watch, Seto. This rock is gonna grow wings and skate across your pond, making ripples wherever it goes. I'll be damned if I don't have some control over my destiny.”

Seto looked absolutely delighted. “Do your best, Garrick. I will eagerly anticipate the show you put on.”

I chuckled at that. *Seto anticipating my show? I had better not disappoint her then.* I then look down at the seed once more and gently slipped it into one of my pockets.

“She'll be safe in there for the moment. Anyhow... so, plans for Tenchi? I take it they involve the words 'First Generation'?” I hazarded.

“No real need,” Seto replied. “He has the ability to create his own Lighthawk Wings. It is completely unprecedented in our history - something no one else has ever been capable of doing without the aid of a Royal Tree. Therefore I have already decided that he is to be the next in line for the throne after Yosho.”

“Ouch! Don't let the poor guy hear that – he'll have the anxiety attack to end all anxiety attacks.”

Seto chuckled. “Of course not. He won't find out until he finally decides he's going to marry those girls.”

“Again, ouch.” I then sighed as my thoughts took another turn. “I gotta admit though. I do envy him.”

“Do you now?” said Seto with a wicked grin. “You could take a little of the heat off him.”

I snorted. “I'll tell you the same thing I told Washu-chan – bad things happen to those that poach on Lord Tenchi's turf. It is a mandate of this universe.”

“Are you so certain now?” she asked.

“Deadly,” I stated flatly. “Although, there is also the mandate that anyone that gets involved with Tenchi will have his luck and misfortune rub off on them. Just watch out for an up-and-comer called Seina Yamada. He's got a thing for Tenchi's cousin, Kiriko Masaki. Nice guy, but he's got bad luck so bad you could literally weaponize it.”

“I see. And you think Tenchi's luck will rub off on you as well?”

I shrugged. “Time will tell. If it does, great! Just be careful about who you allow to associate with Tenchi-kun in the future. If it doesn't oh well. At least I'll have some interesting stories for the grandkids.”

“A little presumptuous, aren't we?”

“Nah, just walking the fine line between fatalism and optimism. More tea?”

“Please. Without the honey this time.”

“Of course.”

Seto and I nattered on for another hour before she decided her time was up. She reminded me to take care of Funaho's seed, and I gave her the tea bags. She then bade me farewell, and left just like that.

I cleaned up the cups and the teapot, then went over to Washu's door and knocked firmly, but politely on the door while removing the seed from my pocket. The door popped open perfunctorily and Washu's voice came from inside.

"Come on in, Garrick."

"Thanks," I said as I went in, closing the door behind me.

"You know," said Washu as she entered some random data on her main holographic console from her floating cushion. "...you're one of the few people here that observes the proper protocols when it comes to gaining access to my lab."

I shrugged. "Not much to it. Just knock and wait and see if you get an answer. If not, then you're probably in the middle of something more important."

"Which I'm not as you can see," she said as she dismissed the console with a grand flourish and spun around to face me. "What's up, Gar-kun?"

I smiled, shaking my head. This was so unreal.

"Whulp, courtesy of our favorite little junior princess manipulator, my application for adoption into the Royal Family of Jurai has been received by the senior princess manipulator and is pending approval."

Washu cackled. "HAH! I knew it! I mean, sure, I knew Seto was here talking to you, and I didn't eavesdrop... but still, I knew it!"

"Har-dee-har. Once you're done getting the giggles out of your system, oh high and mighty genius of the entire universe, I need some basic how-to's for taking care of this kid here." I then showed her the seed.

Washu blinked and whistled. "She really wants to see what you're capable of."

"No kidding," I grumbled. "Not that I'm backing down or won't give it everything I got... but still..." I shook my head. "Look, you can't just whip up a central unit for a Juraian treeship for me, can you?"

"Nope. And Ayeka has the only spare we had."

"Damn." I then looked down to the seed and sighed. "I'm sorry, Katherine. Guess we'll have to wait a while before I can plant you."

"Hold that thought," said Washu. "I said I couldn't make a central unit. I never said I couldn't make something to properly nurture her. And the best part is that we can add it onto your C-Space."

"So you mean that I can properly see to this little one's well being?"

"Of course!"

"Let's get started then! I want this garden to be the envy of all Juraians!"

"Well, if that's your aim then I suggest we bring someone else in on this."

"What?" said Ayeka, at a complete loss for any other words.

"I know, right?" I sighed. "I mean... I like to think that I'm a nice guy and all... but I'm pretty surprised by this turn of events myself."

"Well of course!" replied Ayeka haughtily. "It take more than just being a nice person. You must have strength of character, gravitas, and the perseverance and bearing of a noble."

"Ayeka, my dear Princess? Any more cheese in that line and we'd be able to set up a delicatessen."

"Don't mock me!"

I smiled and cajoled her, "Oh, come on. You just make it too easy sometimes. Why do you think Ryoko picks on you so badly?" I then lowered my voice and added, with a conspiratorial grin, "Not that she doesn't leave herself wide open for a verbal assault herself."

Ayeka grinned back. "She does at that, doesn't she?" Her expression then shifted to something more anxious. "Do you really feel that I... leave myself open?"

"Well, you certainly don't have the most approachable demeanor at times. My advice? Save the untouchable princess act for state functions. You want your people to think of you as someone who will hear them out, right?"

"Well, of course," the princess replied, this time in a more sober tone. "It is one of our highest responsibilities to hold open court so we may hear the grievances of our people."

"Well, there you go then... I think that someone you might want to emulate a bit is a famous Queen of Earth's history, a woman known as Elizabeth the First. She was a remarkable woman. So great was her desire for there to be stability in her land that she forewent marriage. 'I am the bride of England' she would say."

"But... how did she have an heir?"

I shook my head. "Sadly, she didn't. For one thing, rampant inbreeding led to infertility and impotence in the royal family of England. A few even think that Elizabeth was not really the true successor. Her being a bastard-daughter lends a bit of credence to the matter. Also, there was a lot of corruption in the royal household at the time from the Catholic Church trying to interfere in the matters of Britain. Religious fanatics and power mongers. Long story."

A look of realization blossomed on Ayeka's face. "So to ensure that she would never be influenced she sought no suitors. What a terrible fate!"

I nodded sadly. "She was an incredible woman. She led Britain into a golden age the likes of which was never seen again... But during her time, there was no other like her. Such was the adoration of her subjects that she would even go out to dance among the commoners. Especially if the minstrels played a particularly rousing tune."

"Well, if that is true then I suppose she at least had some happiness in her life."

I smiled. "Ask me about her favorite playwright sometime. At any rate... Princess, please... it really would mean a lot to me if you help me." For emphasis, I pull Funaho's seed out of my pocket and showed it to her.

I knew I had her. I couldn't really see it in her bearing, but in her eyes... I could tell she just melted as if I had shown her a particularly cute puppy.

"Alright, Garrick. But not for you," she added quickly. "I am doing this for Funaho... and for this little one."

"Katherine."

"Who?"

"I decided that I would name her Katherine."

"What sort of name is that?"

I smiled. "It is an ancient and much loved name for a princess."

Ayeka was, simply put, astounded at what I did know. Having learned gardening from my mother the same way I learned auto mechanics from my father, I had a lot of common sense knowledge at my disposal, as well as some of the more zen like teachings.

"Oooh!" cooed Ayeka. "These flowers are so big! And such vivid colors!"

"Yes. It's a tropical plant called a Hibiscus. Because it likes sunlight so much we'll have to put it with the Trigona."

"Trigona?"

I pointed to the Euphorbia in question, a six-foot tall collection triangular-shaped stems with spines and tear-drop shaped leaves along the edges of each, all branching upwards in a disorganised mass, and colored a mottled leaf-green.

“What is that thing?” she remarked with wide-eyed shock at the rather imposing plant.

“Euphorbia Trigona,” I told her. “Common name: African Milk Tree. I just like to call it a Trigona.”

“It... has thorns. All over it.”

I smiled. “Yeah. It can be a nasty customer to bump into, especially since it's sap is absolutely poisonous.”

“It's POISONOUS!?”

“Relax,” I replied, scolding her. “Mainly it's just to keep things from eating it. I'd imagine that if your trees didn't have you Juraians to protect them from predators they would have evolved some nasty defense mechanisms as well.”

Ayeka blinked, then smiled nervously. “Oh. Well, when you put it that way I guess I can see why. But why would you have something dangerous like this?”

“Because, look at it! It is magnificent, lovely, and yet imposing as well. And despite that it is an easy going sort of plant. It requires very little care and it disdains pampering. It propagates through cuttings but under loving and patient care it will even flower. Oh, and it absolutely loves sunlight. Desert plant, you know.”

“I have always thought it is strange how plants can thrive in deserts,” the Princess said as she stepped closer to the Euphorbia to get a better look at it.

I smiled. “Someday I need to take you guys to the Mojave. It's hot and dry, but if we go in the springtime it's pleasant. The cacti and sage all blossom, the birds sing, and the land comes to life all around you. If not for the heat, you'd think you weren't in a desert at all.”

“Well that does sound like a pleasant idea,” she said absently. She was now utterly fascinated by the plant.

“I'll talk to Tenchi and Washu-chan about it sometime. But anyhow, would you like to try growing one yourself?”

That got her attention as she looked up at me in surprise. “Ah... well, you did say it was easy to care for, right?”

I smiled. “Pretty much. Just needs a warm and sunny spot. Pot it with peat and perlite, and water it generously about once a week – just long enough for the soil to dry out. That simulates the weather patterns this plant is native to – sudden torrential downpours followed by days of dry weather. Feed it once every three months with a plant food for desert-dwelling plants. It's a very hardy plant, so if you want to err on the side of caution, don't water it.

“So, you want a cutting?”

Ayeka thought about it, but only for a moment. “Yes, I would like one.”

I smiled then went to the box with my smaller bits of gardening supplies, got out the pruning shears and a rag, then went to my Trigona.

I ran my finger along the smooth side of one of the larger stalks and said, “Just a small bit, my friend, so someone else may know the pleasure of your presence.” I then found one of the newer growths, just six inches in length, and growing in a direction that would make it a little more cumbersome to move anyhow, placed the shears, laid the rag over it, and cut.

Ayeka gasped as the thick milky-white sap spurted a drop on my hand. I didn't mind – I don't react as badly to the sap as some do... at least as long as I get to it in a timely manner. For the moment, I set the pruning shears aside and laid the newly cut stalk of Trigona on the rag and offered it to Ayeka.

“Here,” I said as she gingerly took it from me. “Let it dry out a bit in someplace warm. A week or two should do it. Then, plant it and water it judiciously. And just so you know, it will take a while to start growing.”

“Really? Why's that?”

I smiled. “Well, people aren't sure, but I'm certain it's because the plant wants to be sure it can trust you.”

“Really?” said Ayeka, her curiosity piqued.

“Yes. My mother gave this one to me as a gift – it was already established and it took a month of my care before it decided to grow out.”

“Ah, Garrick? What about your hand?”

“I'm getting to it. Unlike some, I'm not hypersensitive to it.” I then made deed to word by getting out another rag, wiping the sap away, and then following it up with a disinfectant wipe. I had a bottle of them in my gardening supplies just for these occasions. “See, all done. Now, let me show you some pictures of the native Texas wildflowers. I guarantee you'll love it.”

We didn't spend much more time going through my catalog of plants. There weren't a whole lot since I never had much room for a garden before. And most of my plants were cacti anyhow. Ayeka was disdainful at first, until I showed her what they looked like when they blossomed... and then I told her that some even fruited afterward, and that the fruit made excellent candies and jellies.

Suffice to say, she was rather eager to try her own hand at caring for cacti. If nothing else, it would give Sasami-chan something new to try her hand at.

Eventually, Ayeka and I had hammered out a rough plan for my garden. We'd fill in the details the next day. At dinner time, she positively gushed about everything she'd learned from me about Earth flora, especially the desert-dwelling varieties, and went on about how she wanted to learn more about earth's plant life.

Sasami looked absolutely pleased by this turn of events. I figured that it was primarily because to her it seemed that Tenchi was the only thing on Earth that she had any real interest in. Ryoko, on the other hand, was so befuddled that she couldn't even think to look for an opening to crack down on Ayeka. Mihoshi was just pleasantly clueless and asked simple questions about what Ayeka learned. And Washu just kept shooting me bemused looks as though to say, ‘You little player, you!’

Tenchi, for his part, was befuddled as well, but it was the pleasant sort. I wasn't one-hundred percent sure, but it was possible that this was a side of Ayeka that Tenchi had never seen until now... and he seemed to like what he saw.

Yosho just smiled. He knew Ayeka to a tee, so I guess he figured it had only been a matter of time. He also shot me looks, but unlike Washu's... his were more speculative. I had a feeling why: Yosho was a favorite of Seto, and it would not surprise me if he knew about her interest in having me adopted into the family.

First thing after breakfast the following morning, I made my way up to Yosho's shrine. Though what he had enshrined up there I had no idea. But knowing the ‘Old Man's’ sense of humor, it was probably some knick-knack of his from Jurai.

Autumn had hit hard. It wasn't freezing, but I had judiciously shunned the idea of going wearing only long sleeves and jeans. Instead, I wore my trusty Levi's Red Tab winter-weight jean jacket, a sweatshirt, a pair of sweatpants under my cargo pants, and wool socks to go with my old, trustworthy Navy boots.

Once I got to the shrine, I went through the proper cleansing ritual of washing your hands and mouth, and then went to the offering box to drop off a few fifty-yen coins. I then went to the shrine itself, clapped my hands twice, then bowed my head in prayer.

As I lifted my head once more, I heard Yosho's voice call out to me.

“You seem to be having a crisis of faith.”

“You could say that,” I sighed as I turned to face him. “I was raised as a Mormon. Recent events have kinda... invalidated a lot of my beliefs.”

“Mormon you say? I've known a few of their missionaries. Good men with good hearts. They don't come much better. I can see some of that upbringing in you... though you certainly seem a little more worldly.”

I shrugged. “I never went on my mission. Never felt the call, I guess. Makes me wonder if that has anything to do with all this.”

Yosho shook his head. “I have no idea why you are here, Garrick, but I do know that's the wrong way to think about this. Come, let's have some tea. There's a lot for us to talk about, and I think that's exactly why you're here.”

“Thanks. It's been a while since I've had some proper green tea.”

I was sat down in Yosho's quarters at his kotatsu (a heated table with a quilt tacked to the edges) and the tea was poured. After I took my first long sip, Yosho broke the silence.

“As I said, there is a lot that we need to discuss, but I think the foremost item is your faith.”

I was taken aback by that – enough that it took me a moment to formulate a response. But Yosho, if anything, was patient.

“Seto wants to see if I'm up to snuff, and you want to discuss religion?”

Yosho smiled kindly. “Whether you like it or not, Garrick, religion is a very important aspect of a person's sense of self. You've suffered a very traumatic blow to that sense of self. Sasami-chan has told me all about it. You're hurting and there is nothing in your belief system for you to fall back on in this scenario. I know this because I've gotten all the discussions from those missionaries I mentioned.”

I sighed. I felt numb and hollow by this point in time. I figured that I might as well go through with this because it couldn't be any worse than I felt now.

“I... don't know for sure what to believe in any more. I mean... some power has drop-kicked me out of my home-world and into yours... where I know for a fact that three goddesses, of which Tsunami is one of them, created this particular universe. I know all this. And I know that it invalidated just about everything I believe in... but now... I just don't know what to *believe* in any more.”

Yosho nodded. “I can understand that. Though I think it's a little less knowing what to believe in, and more the loss you have suffered. Sasami-chan said you were horribly lonely, and the ability for a family to remain together eternally is a central tenet of the Mormon faith. Suddenly, you've been gifted with a seed, from my Funaho no less! And little Sasami wants you to be our brother. I think that someone is trying to get your attention, boy.”

I blink. “Tsunami? But why? I mean... I'm not that important. I'm dust compared to her.”

“That may be true, but the thing is that Sasami-chan cares about you. And that matters to Tsunami more than you might think.”

Because Sasami cares.

Sasami is Tsunami and Tsunami is Sasami.

And anyone that Sasami would care about would have the Goddess's attention just like that.

“I see...” I said slowly. “Thank you for bringing that to my attention, Yosho. I don't know if I would have noticed it myself or not. Just... this is gonna seem kinda silly, but how does one pay their respects to Tsunami-sama?”

Yosho smiled. “When you come back tomorrow I'll start teaching you. But for now, let's move on to more practical topics... little brother.”

I blinked. “Hoo boy.”

Yosho barked a laugh. It was short and relatively quiet, but it was quite a guffaw just the same.

“You have a delightful knack for ironic understatement. Don't worry, though. Mother has decided that she will be the one to take you under her wing.”

I blinked once more. “As in Head of Military and Political Intelligence Funaho?”

“Of course.”

“... You were right. 'Hoo boy' doesn't even begin to cover it.”

Yosho chuckled at my expense. “Don't worry too much. She simply wishes to debrief you. She'll be gentle about it. After all, she's considering making you her son.”

“So I really would be Sasami's brother then. Although I certainly won't be the older one.”

Yosho passed it off with a shrug. “Subjectively, she's only experienced twelve years of her life. And Ayeka's experienced only eighteen. As far as Sasami-chan is concerned, you *are* their elder.”

Yosho then grinned mischievously. “Although you'll still be subordinate to me.”

I rolled my eyes and replied in a droll tone, “Oh gee, just what I always wanted: an annoying *older* brother.”

“I am not annoying,” said Yosho defensively, but I saw straight through it.

“Like hell you are. You aren't even the old man you pretend to be.”

“Ah, so you know that as well.”

I shrugged. “No worries. Not like I'm gonna go blabbing about it. But if you want some advice, I'll give it to you: might want to consider dropping the act sometime. Not right away – I'd wait until Tenchi finally gets himself settled down. Oh, and Noboyuki winds up getting remarried as well.”

“Oh? Who?”

“That cute assistant he's got in his office. The one that comes from an alternate universe. Kinda like me, only without Random Omnipotent Beings getting involved. They have a son together and eventually he winds up going to his mother's homeland to make all kinds of trouble there and a harem as well. Seems like it runs in the family.”

Yosho stared at me with wide-eyed amazement. “Is this some kind of joke!?”

“Not a bit. Just don't let on to Noboyuki. Might jinx the whole damn thing.”

Yosho blinked. “I guess I'll just have to take your word for it then. Mother is going to have a field day with you.”

I snorted. “Don't I know it.”

The old man chuckled, but then turned sober once more as he asked, “Tell me Garrick, what do you know of the way of the sword?”

I blinked as I thought about the implications of this question: all of them pointed to pain in my future.

“I've dabbled in it somewhat in the past.”

Yosho nodded. “I thought as much. Your movements are like that of a grappler. It's a great skill to have, however, among the Royal Household, any formal challenges to a duel you may face are to be decided through your ability as a swordsman.”

“I see. When do you wish to begin, Yosho-sensei?” No sense in delaying the inevitable.

“Tomorrow. After your lessons of doctrine.”

The rest of my day would have been relatively uneventful. With my truck and trailer parked in my workshop, I had easy access to unload, stage, and unpack everything. Let me tell you, having enough room to pre-organize everything for unpack really helps.

However, as I was just finishing with the staging part, I heard a knock on a door somewhere. Just as I was wondering where it came from, a screen popped up in front of my face displaying a pensive looking Ryoko through a wide-angle lens.

“Huh. Peep-hole,” I said thoughtfully as I began to make my way to the door.

“Ah, hey,” said Ryoko nervously as I opened my door to her. “Mind if I come in?”

“Sure, come on in. I was actually wondering when I'd get my first visitor.”

“Oh. Cool.” Ryoko followed me in and then whistled. “Nice. Isn't it a bit big?”

I shrugged. “It is for now, but I plan on filling it up eventually. Honestly, I've always wanted a place like this. Your mom gives out the coolest stuff.”

Ryoko made a sour look at that as we went from the common space and into the workshop.

“Don't call her that.”

I rolled my eyes but let it go for the moment. “So, social call, or did you just want to see what I was up to in here?”

“Bit of both,” said Ryoko. “Really... people been talking... and I kinda guess I never really apologized for what happened.”

I looked at her in surprise. “You mean that whole thing with the sucker punch off the stairs? I already told you guys it was okay.”

“No, I mean... I need to apologize for myself. Not let someone else do it.”

As I got back to work with unloading my stuff and sorting it all out, I suddenly realized that someone, either Washu, Sasami, or both, put Ryoko up to this. I then figured that I might as well make this easy on her.

I smiled gamely over the top of a large box full of bed linens and said, “Thanks. I do appreciate that coming from you, Ryoko. And really, it was just an accident. No hard feelings. So what do you say? Buddies?”

“Heh. Sure thing. You know, you're a pretty laid back guy, Garrick.”

I gave a lopsided grin. “I just try not to sweat the small stuff.”

“For a human a broken neck isn't small.”

“For your mom- sorry, Washu-chan, it is. Though really... try not to let it happen again... hate for me to be in that situation without her to fix me up.”

“Ah, don't worry Garrick. Ain't nothing gonna happen to you with me around. Say, you mind letting me hang out in here now and then?”

“As long as you aren't trying to dodge chores. I'd prefer it if Ayeka didn't think I was letting you hide in here.”

“Ooooh! Kissing up to the princess?” Ryoko teased.

I shrugged as I hefted another box of books. I had quite a few of those. “No. It's just that Ayeka's a nice person and I'd really like it if she were a friend and not an adversary.”

Ryoko rolled her eyes. “If only she'd take that stick out her butt.”

I sighed. “Brutal, but somewhat true. Gotta get past that untouchable princess facade, but the thing is that's all it is – just a facade.”

“Oh, and how do you know?”

I gave Ryoko a flat look. “Ryoko, you do realize we're talking about Misaki's daughter, right? You know, our lady of adores-all-that-is-cute and giver-of-bone-crushing-hugs?”

“I don't think-”

I cleared my voice and then *squeaked*, “MOMMY!”

Ryoko crashed to the shop floor, laughing herself silly. “Okay! Okay! You got me! HAH-HAH! I'd almost forgotten about that!”

I chuckled. “You see, the Princess has a softer side to her.” I then sighed as I pulled over my larger office chair and plunked myself down into it. “Really... in a way I think she's softer than Sasami is.”

“What!?” cried out Ryoko. “Even though she can be such a bitch!?”

I nodded. “It's a defense mechanism.”

“What do you mean?” grumbled Ryoko.

I sighed again. “Look, I know because I've been in her shoes before. I don't mean the whole position-of-privilege thing. Far from it. What I've been through was similar in that I was a boy with a very sweet and tender heart... and everyone around me seemed to want to stomp it flat.”

“What? So, stomp 'em back.”

“That's what I did. So, for some people I was a very sweet boy... until I came across someone I didn't like, then I was like a little demon-spawn child.”

“That's the idea!” cheered Ryoko.

I gave her a sober look. “But I didn't have very many friends because of that.”

Ryoko gave me a funny look. “But some people had to like you.”

“A few did,” I said, shrugging. “Most heard it from others how horrible I was and either avoided me or teased me.”

Ryoko blinked in wide-eyed amazement. “Oh.”

“So, just imagine this adorable little princess. She is sweetness and sunshine – she's so cute she'd almost make you gag, except she's such a nice little kid you just can't bear to hurt her. With me so far?”

“okaaayyyy,” Ryoko drawled suspiciously.

“So, one day she meets some other kids visiting the Royal Palace... but they're all jealous of her, so instead of being her friend like she wants to be, they tease her, take her things, and pull her pigtails. Isn't that just horrible of them?”

“Yeah, that is horrible,” said Ryoko, looking a little sheepish.

“The poor, sweet little princess runs to her mother, crying her eyes out. She feels so hurt that she can't even bear to tell her mother what happened. She has the horrible realization that there are people out there that are just plain mean, and the best thing to do is to be mean right back at them so they can't hurt you.

“So, the next day, instead of letting the kids hurt her like they did before, she calls the guards on them and has them thrown out of the palace.”

“Oh... wow... I never really thought of it that way.”

I nodded. “Now, there's a bit of a difference between her and Sasami... Sasami is strong in ways Ayeka isn't. Sure, she can be hurt, but she bounces back with a vengeance. And she also had Ayeka to watch after her... someone who already knew how mean some people could be... and knew how to be mean right back at them so Sasami didn't have to be.”

Ryoko grumbled. “Even if I know all this and I try to be nice to her, she's still gonna be a first-class bitch.”

“For a while. It's gonna take time, Ryoko. This isn't like when you feel like having some sake so you go and raid the pantry for a jug. It's more like growing a flower. You have to give it sunlight, warmth, food and water, and most of all, time.”

“It sounds so boring though!” groaned Ryoko.

“Hey, I'm not saying you two can't banter. Believe me, you two can have a lot of fun just messing around with each other as long as you don't let it go too far. My brothers and I used to do that a lot.”

Ryoko raised an eyebrow. “Your brothers?”

I sighed. “Yeah. Five of 'em. And we'd mess around with each other in ways you wouldn't believe. I really do miss those knuckleheads, Ryoko.” I then gave Ryoko a sober look. “You got an opportunity here that you really shouldn't squander – and I'm not simply talking about Tenchi's affections here.”

Ryoko gave me a look that was almost a glare. “What do you mean?”

“These people, Ryoko... they're like family. Ayeka, Sasami, even that adorable ditz, Mihoshi – they're all like sisters to you. And the most terrible part is... you don't even seem to realize it.”

Ryoko scoffed. “We're not family.”

I gave Ryoko a glare. “How about you try going out there and telling it to that beautiful blue-haired little princess?”

“What!?” snapped Ryoko. “What the hell, Garrick! I thought we're supposed to be friends here!”

“And I'm doing what any friend would do,” I snapped back sharply, “telling you how it really is. Because someone that isn't your friend wouldn't give two shits about it. And I want my friend to be happy in the end – even if that means she shares a husband with a mean spirited spit-fire of a royal pain in the ass. Because if my friend would just realize it, that princess would be *her* mean spirited spit-fire of a royal pain in the ass.”

“Oh, come on Garrick. It's never gonna be that way.”

“It can be, Ryoko. Just... please... trust me on this. It's better to give this a shot than to regret it later on. There's enough regrets to go around as it is. And I don't want anyone else feeling as lonely as I do. Trust me, if you felt what I do, it would kill you.”

“And what do you feel?” she asked, a hard look on her face, but in her eyes...

“Gone,” I said softly. “Everyone. My family. Not dead. Not missing. Just gone. And me, cursed to never have the chance to see them again, not even in death where it had been promised since time began that families would be reunited. Instead, just cold and lonely eternity.”

“Are you serious?”

“Do I look like I'm lying?”

Ryoko shook her head, at a loss. “How do you deal with that?”

I sighed. “It's hard. Fortunately for me, that beautiful blue-haired little princess out there came to my rescue. She can sense how badly I'm hurting, and she doesn't want to see me hurt like that anymore. And I've pretty much just latched onto the lifeline she's thrown me. Because, I know that if I don't...”

“You'll drown,” Ryoko finished. She then sighed. “You're right. It would kill me if I ever felt what you feel. Even after Yosho sealed me away I at least had my anger. And even when that faded, I didn't have any real memories to fall back on – just a history of debauchery. No real past, so nothing to have lost. And then... there was Tenchi. I saw him grow up.

“And now I have all these people around me... I guess... that's what kinda scares me... the idea of losing them.”

I nodded. “It's something we all have to deal with. Fortunately for you, they're all pretty tough customers. It'd take something real nasty to take any one of your family out.”

Ryoko snorted. “That's definitely something I have to give to the bitch. She definitely knows how to duke it out.”

I scoffed affectionately at the thought. “She does at that, doesn't she?” I then shook my head and got back up out of my chair and surveyed the unpacking thus far. “Anyhow, this stuff isn't gonna get itself unpacked. Mind lending a hand?”

Ryoko sighed. “Do I really gotta?”

“No, but it does mean I'll get to sitting down and drinking with you sooner than later, buddy.”

“Okay, when you put it that way... what do you want me to do?”

I smiled. “The boxes over there next to you have my library in them. They'll need to be brought over to the bookshelves upstairs and then shelved. Don't worry about them being in any sort of order. I just want them out of the boxes and on the shelves for now – I can sort through them later.”

“Huh. Sounds easy enough.”

“Especially for you – you can levitate and go through the walls.”

With Ryoko helping me, the unpacking went a lot faster than it would have gone with just me working at it. Also, having a lot more than enough space to put everything helped as well – I didn't have to 'tetris' anything to get all my belongings into place.

So, when Sasami-chan brought us both lunch, I left her some very specific instructions for Southern-Style Peach Iced Tea, and that it was to be saved for something special later on after dinner.

That night as the dinner table was being cleared, I made the announcement.

“Hey guys! Good news! Thanks to Ryoko's help, I'm all unpacked. All there's left for me is the settling in.”

A round of cheers went around the table and I held my hands up, signaling I had more to say.

“To celebrate, I'm going to share some of my Good Stuff with everyone tonight... at least everyone that is old enough to partake.”

“Good stuff?” said Ryoko, her curiosity piqued.

“What sort of stuff is this?” asked Ayeka.

I smiled. “You'll see. I'll be right back. Sasami-chan? Would you be so kind as to get that iced tea out and some tumbler glasses?”

“Sure thing, Gar-kun.”

Quickly I went to my room and got the special wooden box that protected the six mason jars inside it and then went back down to the main room. I got there just as Sasami was setting out the tumblers.

“What is that?” asked Sasami as I opened the box and carefully removed one of the jars.

I grinned and said, “Mountain Dew. White Lightning. Moonshine.”

Yosho blanched. “You mean that's American Corn Liquor!?”

I cackled softly. “Oh yeah. It's the genuine article. The only way it could be even more authentic is if I had purchased it from someone that hadn't paid the liquor tax on it. Don't worry though. This stuff is only one-hundred-fifty proof.”

Yosho made some inarticulate noises as his face went white.

“Grandpa!?” cried out Tenchi in alarm.

“That 'stuff' of his,” croaked Yosho, “is ten times stronger than the sake we usually get!”

“Whoah,” said Ryoko fervently.

Everyone else just looked at me in wide-eyed horror.

I just grinned back at them all. “Yes people, this is the beverage of choice for the people that made their livings in the smoky mountain hills of the Appalachians and the rugged steppes of the Tennessee River Valley. They would sit on their back porches after a long and hard-day's work, and ease the aches and pains in their bodies by slowly imbibing this liquor. This is a working man's booze – strong enough to knock a mule off its feet.

“Of course, such a beverage commands respect, so many of these hardy working types would mix it with something... and what better than an ice-cold glass of tea, sweetened by the nectar of peaches picked at the peak of ripeness.”

I then began mixing the drinks. For Tenchi, Ayeka, Mihoshi, and Yosho just a jigger of moonshine to theirs. Myself, Washu, and Ryoko got the half-and-half treatment. Sasami, of course, just had the straight iced tea... I specifically instructed her to watch her drink vigilantly.

“A toast!” proposed Washu once all the drinks were poured. “To our new family member: Garrick Grimm! Let's hope he finds a cute wife!”

Sasami gleefully agreed.

Ayeka found it delightfully scandalous.

Ryoko would have made a spit-take if she hadn't waited for Washu to finish.

Mihoshi wondered out loud if any of her old classmates might like me.

Ryo-Ohki 'mii-ahh'ed.

Tenchi laughed.

Yosho just smiled and raised his glass.

I smiled as well, shaking my head. “Oh, I know what you're after, Washu-chan, but I'll drink to that anyhow.”

“KAMPAI!” we all cheered as we clinked our glasses together.

A thump, and something muffled. It didn't matter. It was warm and soft in here. Stay that way.

The sound again. This time, something wrapping around me. Leave me alone. Sleeping...

“niii-sannn,” came the voice once more.

Without thinking about it, I opened an eye... and then gasped as there was another face in mine.

“niii-sannn, give me piggy-back ride!” pouted a chocolate-brown face with a mess of blonde curls.

“mihoshi,” I whispered. “wake up.”

“niiii-saaannnn!” she pouted again. While that was cute, this situation was entirely inappropriate. Really I know I went to my own bed last night... I then looked around... and saw that I was actually on the couch in the main room... with one of the comforters thrown over me.

Oh. Must have gotten a little more hammered than I had intended. Guess that's what I get for drinking with the Space Pirate.

“niiii-saannnn!” Mihoshi persisted.

Cute – adorable even – but still not funny.

Nope.

Not one bit.

... Well, maybe I did have it coming. What was I thinking last night? Yeesh.

“Mihoshi, please wake up,” I pleaded.

“piggyback ride!” said Mihoshi happily. And then the hurting began.

“AAAAUUUUGGGHHH!!!” I cried out in agony as my ribs splintered.

To be certain, that definitely shook things up, and it was pretty much a repeat of my arrival here, with a few key differences: 1) they weren't wondering who the hell I was and 2) I was able to explain exactly what happened and why thanks to the removal of the language barrier.

Washu tutted in a disappointed manner as she reviewed my medical scans.

“What am I going to do with you Garrick?”

Slap me back together again and stick me out there. The damage to my ribs and internal organs had been extensive... Enough that Washu had me on external life-support for the moment while her medical nanomachines removed bone fragments from my lungs and liver. It was a very strange sensation to not need to breathe, let me tell you. I don't really recommend it.

“While I admit this is fun, I can't imagine its very healthy for you.”

I rolled my eyes as I typed on the holographic keyboard, *Can't live in a bell jar forever.*

Washu sighed. “No, I guess you can't. But seriously, why you? Why not anyone else?”

Why indeed. Murphy's Law, Washu-chan. It's not the one round with your name on it you need to worry about – it's the ten-thousand other odd rounds labeled 'Occupant'.

Washu actually snickered at that one and shook her head.

“Military. All the same.” She then blinked as she had a thought. “Maybe that's what we should have been aiming for all along here.”

I glared at her. *Don't you dare pack me off to the GP. I don't care how highly they come recommended – I am not dealing with police work!*

“Oh, stop your whining,” Washu snapped matronly. “I just wanted to give you the body modification so a little squeeze from Mihoshi or one of the others doesn't kill you.”

If I could have sighed, I would have. *You know, I'm not exactly all that eager to give up my humanity.*

“Oh? What about all the other interesting things you've been getting involved in. From what I understand of your psyche, your idea of self-betterment also applies to upgrades where you can manage them. Transhumanism does have a certain appeal, doesn't it?”

I gave Washu the sort of look a man gives when their friend walks in on them in the bathroom oh-so-blithely just to get the stick of deodorant they left behind... particularly when that friend happens to be female and appears to be twelve years old.

Stay out of my head!

“Oh, c'mon Garrick. Like you didn't really anticipate that, especially when you know I've had to deal with the likes of Doctor Clay only far too recently for my liking.”

I couldn't sigh, so I just facepalmed.

Fine, fine. You're right – I should have been more genre savvy. Yeesh. This oughta teach me to manifest in a place without mad geniuses.

“Well, at least your sense of humor is still working.”

One of the few things that is right now. But anyhow... Look, can you just make me a little more durable so nobody accidentally kills me like Mihoshi almost did?

Washu hummed thoughtfully at that. “I suppose I could. You sure you don't want enhanced strength or anything like that?”

No longer lifespans, no superhuman powers. I just don't want my damn head being taken off the moment somebody here sneezes.

“What about faster healing?”

I thought about that for a moment, then typed, *A little bit. Bear in mind, if I do somehow manage to get hurt with these upgrades it's probably because I was either in a desperate situation or I was being monumentally stupid. Which happens sometimes.*

“I can understand that. Believe it or not, I too have those can't-see-the-forest-for-the-trees moments. Pain deadening?”

Strictly proportional to adrenal output. Better make that exponentially proportional. If I'm in a tight spot and it's not serious enough to warrant immediate attention, then I really don't want to know.

Washu shrugged. “That's how it pretty much works anyhow, but I'll give your endorphin and adrenal system a tweak. But in the mean time, there some people who want to see you.”

Washu sauntered off and then Mihoshi came in out of the shadows with a pensive expression on her face.

“Washu-chan told me you were gonna be okay,” she said. “But I still feel really bad about what happened. I'm not even supposed to be able to use my super-strength when I sleep!”

I shook my head and typed, *Shit happens. Washu-chan is looking into this, but I'm pretty sure that this is absolutely not your fault, Mihoshi.*

“Pretty sure it was the booze,” came Washu's voice echoing from wherever she was working. “She's never gotten that drunk that quickly before.”

I looked to Mihoshi, then typed, *There, you see? If anything it's my fault for bringing out the moonshine. Now that we know, from now on it's only sake for you, police lady.*

“Oh thank goodness!” cried out Mihoshi as she lit up like a lightbulb. “I was so worried that I might hurt Tenchi-kun, too!”

I smiled and decided to tease her a little. *Oh? What about the old Earth saying, "You always hurt the ones you love"? You certainly did a number on me!* Mihoshi blinked cutely as she cast her eyes upwards in thought, her fingertips to her lips as she pondered.

"Hmm... Well, I do like Gar-kun, but not how I like Tenchi-kun..." She suddenly brightened once more as she exclaimed, "I know now! Gar-kun is like if Mihoshi had an older brother! Because Gar-kun is nice like an older brother is, and he is also tough like an older brother."

I raised a speculative eyebrow. *You sure about that 'tough' part?*

"Broken ribs are painful," said Mihoshi. "I broke one rib once and it hurt so much I cried like a baby. But I broke twelve of your ribs, and punctured your liver and lungs. Even an older brother would scream like you did."

I shrugged wryly. *I guess when you put it that way.*

"Okay, times up! It's my turn now!" came Ryoko's voice bawdily from the entrance.

"Mooouuuu," pouted Mihoshi cutely.

Oh g'wan you! Later let's see if you and I can work out a tactical training course for my C-Space that's worthy of the GP.

"Oh! That sounds like fun!" exclaimed Mihoshi. "I'll get Yukinojo's help and we'll have the plans ready in no time!" And with that she took off at an energetic jog.

I smiled and shook my head as I typed for Ryoko: *Tenchi and the rest of you are gonna have your hands full with her if you don't learn how to manage her.*

"Eh, she's harmless," Ryoko replied blithely.

I glared at her, then pointedly raised my gown and gestured sharply to the brilliantly colored bruises on my chest.

Ryoko had the decency to look sheepish. "Eh-heh. Yeah, that's right. You're a bit squishy, aren't ya?" I rolled my eyes at that and Ryoko got the message. "Yeah, sorry. Anyhow... Look, I just wanted to say I really did have fun last night. It's great, you know, just to kick it with someone that likes to take it easy. Especially when he does it while drinking. Just do me a favor and don't die on us, okay? Hate to lose my drinking buddy just like that."

As long as you're there to watch my back, Buddy, I typed back at her with a grin.

"Hah! You got it. I have to get going now. Tenchi wanted to say hi."

Sure thing. Catch ya later.

Ryoko and I exchanged a high-five before she sauntered off. As she and Tenchi passed each other, she gave him a saucy wink and that surprised the poor guy.

"Ah, hi Garrick. You doing okay?"

As well as I can. Washu-chan does good work when she feels moved to do so.

He laughed nervously. "Yeah, I guess she does... but... I don't know... Are you really okay, Garrick?"

I gave him a look. There was nothing special about it. It was flat – could feel in in the way my brows suddenly felt so heavy over my eyes. But there must have been something in my eyes as I typed the words...

I will be, Tenchi. I have to be.

"Wait a minute, what do you mean by that?"

Tenchi... I've introspected quite a bit in my lifetime, and there is one thing I've learned about myself is that I deal well with suffering. I've had my hopes crushed, my merits squandered, and dreams turned to ash. I have been ridiculed, embarrassed, harassed, neglected, and scorned.

And yet despite everything, for some reason I have persevered. Somehow, somewhere in my upbringing, I had gained the sense that no matter what happens, no matter how unbearable and painful life has become, the only direction to go is forward.

And now, it seems that the penultimate in cruel fates has been perpetrated upon me. The road back is gone, and the only path is the one that lies before me. So I will continue on as I have, Tenchi. Ever forwards, no matter how often I stumble and fall.

“Garrick,” Tenchi began slowly, but surely. “I’m glad that you have that strength. For a little bit, I really was worried about you.”

I smiled ruefully. *Don't get me wrong, Tenchi. I am hurting. Not just from Mihoshi's misplaced affections... but you get what I mean. I'm just glad that I wound up here.*

Tenchi smiled. “I know what you mean. These people... they're wonderful.”

I smiled back at him slyly. *Oh yes. Such wonderful girls you mean.*

“Huh?” Tenchi replied, blinking cluelessly.

Those girls all love you, and you love all them... but you can't decide for yourself if you love one over the other. Am I right?

“Er... yeah, right so far,” said Tenchi nervously.

So, here's what you do: you start taking them out on dates.

“DATES!?” cried out Tenchi. “Altogether!?”

Of course not you goof! One at a time, they each get a turn with you.

“Ah... okay... but why?”

EPIC FACEPALM 2X COMBO!

Tenchi... The girls all love you, and you love them, but you won't make a gods-be-damned move! Why the hell do you think things get so fraggin' out of hand here!? They get so antsy and full of nervous energy they don't know what to do with it... well, at least Ayeka and Ryoko don't. Sasami, Washu, and Mihoshi all have their hobbies to help them relieve the tension.

Tenchi's eyes went wide. “You mean that's why they fight all the time!?”

It's a factor. Probably the biggest one for sure, but still, just one factor. I've been talking to them, as you've probably noticed. I've had yet to talk to you about this matter, but now, here we are.

“Waituhminute... why would you do that?”

Look, Tenchi, I like a little bit of drama now and then, but not all the time and not when it can easily devolve into laser death-blades flying all over the place and kiloton punches and kicks being thrown around. As we've seen today, I go squish pretty easily, so this is every bit as much me looking out for my own interests as well as your own.

“But... Washu-chan could-”

I stopped him with a sharp, cutting gesture, then typed, *Washu-chan can do a lot of things. She's a regular miracle worker. But what we're not gonna do is go turning me into some immortal nigh-invulnerable ultimate unstoppable force. I wouldn't be Human anymore if she did that and I think she agrees with me. Granted, I am getting some stuff to help make me tougher and recover a bit faster, but that's about it – I'm not getting the full blown GP Body Modification.*

“I... see then,” said Tenchi, his eyes downcast. “I never really thought of it before. I mean... I thought it was strange that I've gotten through such bad situations before... but now that you're here I've seen that... Well, I guess that since Mother was half-Juraian... it only makes sense that I'd be tougher than a normal human.”

Oi, don't be getting down on me, Tenchi-kun. You have to understand that no matter what you learn about yourself, you're still the same person you are. You just have a better understanding of that person is all. Remember: the focus of introspection should be to figure out how you got to this point, not what might have or could have been.

Tenchi's eyes widened in shock as his gaze snapped to mine. “Oh wow! Jeeze!” He then shook his head and went on, “Damn, I can be such an idiot sometimes. You really must be older than the rest of us.”

I laughed... but no sound came out. My lungs were still out of commission. But Tenchi seemed to get the idea anyhow as I typed, *Washu-chan and Yosho don't count. I'm only 36, going on 37.*

Tenchi laughed back at me. “You're twenty years older than I am! You sure you're not half-alien, too?”

I smirked. *Technically speaking, I am an alien. Interdimensional refugees count, don'tcha know?*

Tenchi snorted. “Everyone I know is an alien. I guess it can't be helped then. After all, what's one more?”

My smirk became an all-out grin. *That's the spirit, Tenchi-kun. Now then, about these dates... Tenchi's good cheer evaporated in a groan. Will you relax? I got something special in mind. First up will be Ryoko and I will chaperon. Since all my paperwork is in order, I'll have Washu-chan transport us up to Yokosuka.*

Tenchi blinked. “But why Yokosuka?”

I grinned. *Because it's one of the few places in all of Japan where you can get an American-style burger. Trust me on this – Ryoko will love it, and you probably will too. We'll go onto the Naval base and I'll show you guys around – give you the nickel tour. After that, I'll take you two up to Yokohama and turn you loose there. I highly recommend that you take her to Cosmo World – she'll have a blast.*

“She will?” Tenchi said in surprise.

What could be better? Morning spent getting a guided tour of a foreign military base, food by people that live it up the way she likes to, and then an afternoon spent with the guy she likes the most, just taking it easy and having fun.

Tenchi shook his head in shock. “I am such an idiot.”

I shook my head. *No. You're just inexperienced. This is part of why Sasami-chan wants me to be your older brother.* And with that I reached over and playfully scruffled Tenchi's hair.

“Hey!” hissed Tenchi as he ducked away. “I'm not a kid!”

I rolled my eyes and typed, *Admits I'm twenty years older than him, and then says not to treat him like a kid. Typical.*

“I have my pride you know,” he grumbled.

Swallow a bit. It builds character.

“Oh dear!” came a cultured voice at just the right volume. “I must be interrupting! I'll be on my way.”

I waved urgently to Princess Ayeka, bidding her to come over. Blinking, she did and and I typed,

No no! It's quite alright. Lord Tenchi and I have had plenty of time to chat. I then turned to Tenchi with a grin as I typed, *We'll talk more about this later on in private.*

“Ah, sure!” said Tenchi nervously as he rubbed the back of his head. He then turned and quickly left with a parting call of, “Get well soon, Garrick.”

Ayeka stared after him, mystified at his hasty departure. “I wonder what's gotten into him?”

I couldn't laugh, but I could pound the side of my bed. *Lord Tenchi and I were discussing what he should do about you and the rest of his paramours.*

“What!?” cried Ayeka, scandalized.

Oh, calm down Princess! Don't burst a blood vessel – you knew this was coming.

Ayeka composed herself, saying, “Well yes, it's one thing to know... but it's another to hear it put so blithely.”

My apologies, I typed with a sheepish expression. *I am renowned for my brutal honesty. But we're digressing, milady. I must say, I am happy you did come to see me.*

“Well of course I would. You can't honestly say that you thought I wouldn't come, can you?”

Of course not. You're your mother's daughter, after all.

Ayeka gave me a confused look. “What do you mean by that?”

I smiled and gestured to the bedside hover-cushion. *Come, have a seat and we'll talk.*

“As you wish.” She strode over with proper, lady-like movements and gracefully and decorously lowered herself onto the floating cushion. “Now, what is it you wish to discuss, Garrick?”

I apologize, Princess, if this is the first you've heard of it... but I'm pretty sure you've heard there are plans in the works to adopt me into the Royal Family.

Ayeka sighed. “The seed was a big hint. I got the rest of the story from Sasami. If it weren't for the fact that Funaho herself is originally from here then I might wonder what in Tsunami's name Seto is thinking.”

You think I'm not cut out for it?

“Yes and no, Garrick. Some aspects of you would fit well. You certainly have a charisma about you that the common people would find mystifying. But the rest of the Nobility might find you... wanting for refinement.”

And thus the seed.

Ayeka nodded solemnly. “Lady Seto has her reasons, Garrick. For one thing, she does like to spoil Sasami, and nothing would make Sasami happier than being able to call you her Big Brother and really mean it. For another, she does not want you to suffer the same stigma Funaho suffered. Caring for a Royal Tree is one of the highest honors of common folk. They are respected even by Father for the role they play. In fact, some of the nobility even got their start that way.”

Ah! Like squires to their knights!

“Indeed,” replied Ayeka with a pleased smile that I read as 'By George, I think he's got it!' Her look then became serious as she went on, “Remember that well, Garrick – if you are adopted into the family, you will indeed have been elevated to a rather lofty position, technically speaking, of course. However, in the eyes of the nobility you will be nothing more than an upstart and a potential threat.” Her eyes suddenly took on a worried cast. “Tread carefully, my brother.”

My eyes widened in surprise at that last bit... not so much the warning to tread carefully, but the fact she called me her brother. And then to drive the point home, she suddenly leaned towards me, her face darting to my right... and as suddenly as I realized it, she pulled away from the chaste kiss she had given me.

She took in my shocked expression and said, “Do not worry, dear brother. I love Lord Tenchi more than anything else... but that doesn't mean I don't have room in my heart for anyone else.” She then shook her head in rueful amusement. “You are such a clever thief, stealing girls hearts the way you do. How did you ever not find someone to marry?”

I shrugged helplessly and typed, *I don't know. Probably a lack of girls actually looking for husbands. Anytime I met a really special girl... you know, the sort who's got that smile that can light a world... the one that makes ordinary and mundane adornments seem mystical and hypnotic... the one whose very presence makes you take notice... They are always already with someone else... and always that someone else understands just what kind of treasure they have. And I don't have the evil in me to steal it from them.*

Ayeka gave me a fascinated look. “Tell me more about this girl,” she said.

I smiled. *It was at training for a job – the details don't matter. I saw her in the lobby, waiting with everyone else. She was a dainty little woman – shorter than even you, and yet so perfectly proportioned that you might have taken her as some sort oversized doll. She had this delightfully flirty skirt on and a set of strappy pumps with her ankles adorned with all kinds of bangles and beads. She had a glorious fall of dark hair and these eyes and sparkled with amusement anytime she looked at you.*

I couldn't talk to her at first. Two other men had already gotten her attention and they spent a lot of time over the next few days talking with her about all sorts of things. Eventually, though, I managed to find her alone, for the most part, and I did talk with her. But it turned out that she not only had a man in her life, but a child as well.

I suppose it would be just as well. They weren't married – she was a free spirit... too free to allow herself to be shackled by the idea of being married. And I don't think I could have tolerated such an existence for too long.

Suddenly I was glomped from the side opposite Ayeka. Turning, I saw that Sasami had attached herself to me like a limpet.

“Gar-nii-san has the worst luck,” she lamented.

I looked to Ayeka, who simply smiled and reached over to rub the back of Sasami's head, which was firmly embedded in my side.

I smiled wanly and typed, *Maybe, my adorable Sasami-imouto... but I think it's coming around. After all, I have such wonderful sisters now. I can wait for a woman to wish to be my wife.*

“Okay, no more keyboard for you,” came Washu's voice as she approached. “Your lungs are just fine now so you can go ahead and use 'em. I'll go ahead and turn off the neural interdiction now.” A holographic control panel appeared at Washu's side as she reached up, and then entered a complex series of keys without any markings. Suddenly my diaphragm twitched and sent me into a coughing fit as I got myself back into sorts.

“Ah, thanks,” I said once the worst was past. I was still trying to get my throat fully cleared – it felt so phlegmy.

“Brother,” said Ayeka, begging a question, “is it really important to you that the woman you love marries you?”

I shrugged and said with a rough voice, “Not so much the legal definition... just that she swears herself to me – a vow to be there for me when I need her, and for me the same to her. A real partner in life, as it were. We share joys and sorrows, we make babies and raise them together, and we stick together no matter how tough it gets.”

Washu tutted disdainfully. “You're right. As special as that other girl was, you wouldn't have been able to tolerate that sort of mindset for long. You've been hurt so much in the past that demanding such an oath is almost automatic. You need that sense of security – and I don't mean that lightly. It's not an unhealthy thing, either. Really, how much do you love a person if you're not going to promise something like that? It really seems naïve of her.”

“Indeed,” agreed Ayeka. “In fact, I almost sorry for that girl. What must have happened to her to make her afraid of making a commitment like that?”

I sighed – never had it felt so good to do that – and said, “I have no idea, but Washu-chan is right. With everything else in my life being as unstable as it was, the last thing I needed was a girlfriend who had commitment issues. Anyhow... How much longer do I gotta sit here, Doc?”

Washu smiled – it was almost a loving look. “Just a few more hours, Gar-kun. However, a lot of your resources are being expended – not only to repair the damage done, but also make the modifications you requested. I'll need to give you a couple more nutrient injections, and then you'll need a nap.”

“Okay. What about the modifications?”

“They shouldn't impact your lifestyle at all. Your skin, connective tissues, and pretty much everything else are being reinforced with carbon monofilament weaves, and your bones will have monomolecular carbon rods reinforcing them.”

“That's a lot of carbon. Where's it all coming from?”

“Your body's waste byproducts for now. A lot of it is from my nanomachines stripping the carbon atoms out of CO₂ molecules and just turning the remaining O₂ loose in your bloodstream. However, I'll still need to inject you with some elemental carbon in a liquid suspension to help speed things up.”

I shrugged once more and rolled my sleeve up. “No time like the present.”

I fell asleep soon after that and I had a dream of being a child again. I was playing a forest full of grand, ancient trees. These trees were the welcome sort – tall, but easy to climb. It was peaceful. Sunny. Warm. With a cool breeze, the blue sky full of white, puffy clouds, and the air filled with the smell of wood, earth, leaves, and the call of the cicadas.

One tree was especially large and beautiful. It was special. I loved climbing it, walking its marvelously twisty paths and finding all kinds of hiding places and perches.

But even though I felt that I had the company of these wonderful trees... I still wished that I had friends...

As soon as I had thought it, they were all there. The other children – mostly girls. I liked girls. They were fun. The boys were okay too. We would do boy-things together. But the girls... oh how I loved to tease them. They were always so funny when they would run away squealing. Or even when I made one or two a little angry – that was even more fun because then they'd chase me! But they were having fun, too. I could see it in their eyes.

But most of all...

I could feel the trees all around us, watching us fondly. Lovingly. Like a grandparent watches their descendents playing in their yard.

Especially the grandest one.

She would protect us all when we needed it the most.

Time passes. The months drifted by lazily as Autumn turned to Winter, and Winter inexorably gave way to spring.

Tenchi began dating the other girls. Even Sasami-chan, but we didn't really call those dates. Especially since Ryo-Ohki often tagged along. But I knew better. At the very least, Tenchi was taking my advice to heart – he began to step a little outside his comfort zone and, finding that the feelings really were reciprocal, he found that it wasn't so bad a thing to be a Ladies' Man. The girls were all more than willing to take things slowly, and that was fine with him.

As for The Girls, well... they all finally began to settle down.

Ryoko and Ayeka went from petty rivalry to friendly rivalry. Downright playful even. It was starting to enter the 'good theater' category of fun once the two decided to really go at it. Of course, it always was, but back then it was the sort you'd only watch from High Earth Orbit. But now, we could sit down at the dinner table together... and while the two would toss out the most outlandish and scandalous slander at each other, it was all done with grins that belied the vicious verbal exchanges.

Mihoshi actually tried to do better. And by try, I mean that she even began to subconsciously throw her crazy luck at things. She was still a klutz, a total spaz, and seemingly clueless... but she was no more naïve than the rest of them. Oh, and Washu and I worked together to finally get a working guidance beacon setup for Yukinojo to follow. No more crash landings.

Washu was... well, Washu. There wasn't changing any of that. She still messed around with everyone, and once I had settled in there were no sacred cows. Of course, I would always give as good as I got from her.

Sasami didn't change much either... except that I established an all-hands-on-deck policy regarding dinner. As an old friend of mine put it, “Those who help will eat and those who don't won't.”

My aim was to make it so my adorable little sister didn't have to work so hard in the kitchen. I knew what it was like because I had been there. You try cleaning up after six siblings that hardly did anything for themselves.

Sasami protested, of course, but I insisted. Sure, it was rough going at first. I found that we had to clearly label all the ingredients to prevent mix-ups (I'll admit that salt and sugar is an easy one to make if you aren't careful). Prep work like cutting and peeling vegetables was an easy enough task once you knew what to do. Getting the table set was almost a chore in and of itself, with as many place settings as we needed. There were also more menial tasks, like stirring the pots so nothing burned and fixing tea and beverages. My sweet iced oolong tea knocked everyone for a loop and I soon found myself having to prepare it in large quantities.

Of course, I changed as well.

Mostly, what I did was help Tenchi with his field work, and Scrappy the Wonder Truck was endlessly useful. Granted, there wasn't much actual growing going on this time of year, but ground still had to be turned, fertilized, turned again, and kept free of weeds. There was also the irrigation system that had to be maintained, as well as the tools themselves... and then there was Scooby.

With Washu's help I did find a Mazda B2500 Crewcab and turned it into a ridiculously efficient diesel-electric drive and then christened the newly retrofitted vehicle 'The Scooby-Doo Express'.

And then I filed the patent.

There was no response from the automotive industry right away, but I got a lot of hate-mail from the OPEC people – it was all bluster, though. It posed no threat to their corporate interests because it ran on diesel, and I wasn't keeping anyone from using it. Noboyuki had to retain a lawyer for me. The funny part was that the man waived the legal fees in exchange for doing the conversion on his vehicle. The fuel savings alone would pay for his usual fees within a few months, and to make it even better we turned it into a publicity stunt. Soon enough, every Japanese auto manufacture was looking into offering diesel-electric options... each with their own proprietary quirks, of course.

OPEC was even less happy about that, but their legal avenues were exhausted. Washu never said anything, but I think she wound up stopping an assassination attempt. But then, explosions around here were a pretty regular occurrence anyhow.

But the most interesting changes were because of my lessons from Yoshō and Washu.

Washu, not satisfied that I was fulfilling my potential with a bachelors degree in Mechanical Engineering, felt I would be better suited going for a double-doctorate in Electrical and Mechanical Engineering fields. With her personalized attention, she fast-tracked me through everything and we found the most prestigious universities that would permit me to get credit by examination. Scooby wound up being part of my doctoral thesis for both fields.

Did I ever mention that I learn ridiculously fast under dedicated attention?

As for Yoshō... he taught me everything I would ever need or want to know about Jurai. I learned about the religion (or rather, the lack thereof), the monarchy, the government, the school system, the cultures, the customs, the food, the holidays and even the languages.

But most importantly, he taught me the sword styles.

I've always had suspicions about my martial aptitude. Sure, I've got endurance out the ass, but mostly because I know how to pace myself. And I can certainly lose myself in the moment which can lead to that all important battle-fugue state. But the most bizarre thing about me was that despite my clumsiness I am a savant at swordplay. In the few informal spars I have been in just to see what I can do, I found that I excel at parrying blows and spotting the opening I needed to score that one precise strike.

I'm good with a sword.

I'm even better with two.

But I am devastating with a sword and a shield.

For now, however, Yosho only allows me one sword... and he has been very pleased with what he has been seeing so far.

For example, he would take Tenchi by surprise time and time again with his disappearing act. I, on the other hand, knew to anticipate such moves and Yosho had to become... creative. Seriously, words cannot express how happy that man was when he realized how much potential I had. He figured that after I got my technique down pat all I'd need was simple strength training to better resist an enemy that sought to batter me with sheer brute force.

Of course... Murphy still loves me like a redheaded step-child.

One week Mihoshi came home early and surprised me with a lake-landing while I was free-running. The small tsunami that made washed me into a thicket and caused me to startle a nest of Suzumebachi. Fucking OUCH.

Then there was the time Tenchi, Yosho, Noboyuki, and I all decided to have a guys' evening in the floating onsen... only someone forgot to mention this fact to the girls, who all decided to descend on the place en masse. We never could get the blood out of the wood decking and it all had to be replaced.

Ryoko was not without guilt when she somehow got the lot of us roped into a freaking PUNISHMENT GAME! You remember the MTV show *Silent Library*? Guess what – IT ORIGINATED IN JAPAN! She thought it was just a regular game show and I am still a little miffed about it.

But there was one event that particularly stood out... We had all decided to have a little fun in Tokyo... but I had forgotten about something critically important.

The Tokyo Subway Nerve Gas Attack.

We weren't in the subways when it happened. But we were in the area. We were close enough that poor sweet Sasami-chan saw the people dragging themselves out of the subway, shuddering and foaming at the mouth as they tried in vain to breath.

Needless to say, the perpetrators of the attack were mysteriously delivered to the Tokyo Police.

Even though nobody blamed me, I never really forgave myself for that lapse. Not for what Sasami witnessed. Not for the loss of lives I could have prevented.

I still have bad dreams about it to this day.

It was yet another crisp day in the earliest part of Spring. Tenchi and I were working one of the fallow fields, turning the soil in preparation for planting next season.

“Ready, Tenchi?” I called out from Scooby at one end of the field.

Tenchi waved. “Go for it!”

With that, I triggered Scooby's power winch, and away we went. Tenchi had once complained that there didn't seem to be enough hours in the week to get all the plowing done, so I started brainstorming for a simple way of making it happen faster.

The project had taken a month in total, mainly just to get a hold of everything we needed. The most difficult being an old, almost antique, horse-drawn plow. With that one acquisition everything else fell into place – the 2000lb. power winch and the modified harness were comparatively easy.

Of course, the winch itself was a heavy duty model. I wanted to ensure that it was intended for frequent use and not give out after turning just one or two fields. Therefore, the winch was even more expensive than the plow. But I was otherwise satisfied, especially as Tenchi finished the row and we stopped to look back at what we had done.

“Wow,” said Tenchi. “Three fields this morning and we're just now stopping to eat yet. I would have never thought this was possible. You really are a miracle worker, Garrick.” I scoffed as I went into Scooby to power him down and get the bento that Sasami had made for us.

“The only miracle was me showing up on your doorstep the way I did without killing anyone. This is just a little bit of my particular brand of ingenuity. Besides, I had to do something to help make sure you don't wind up being overworked like last time. And turning these fields is the hardest part by far.”

“I'm thankful for your help, Gar-kun,” he said as he accepted his half of the bento from me.

“Just doing my part, Tenchi.”

“My my! Look at all this progress! You two certainly do work hard.”

Tenchi practically jumped at the voice. “Lady Funaho! Ah, what are you doing here?”

I turned and, sure enough, there she was – the elegant and ever-composed Lady Funaho, First Wife to Emperor Asuzu of Jurai and Jurai's Minister of Intelligence.

She smiled and said, “You make it sound as though I need a reason to visit with my family here on Earth, Tenchi-kun.”

I smiled as Tenchi rubbed the back of his head sheepishly. “Well... you do have an important job, and Jurai is so far away.”

“It's nothing that I can't get away from for a few days. Especially when there is something as important as your friend standing behind you. Would you care to introduce us, Tenchi-kun?”

“Wha?” said Tenchi. I smiled – Funaho's sudden appearance had just about completely scrambled his brains. “Oh! Right! Gar-kun, this woman is Lady Funaho... she is Grandfather's Mother. Lady Funaho, this is Garrick Grimm, our good friend from another version of Earth.”

“It is my pleasure to make your acquaintance, Lady Funaho,” I said as I bowed deeply to the noble woman.

“The pleasure is all mine, Mr. Grimm. However, in the future, when it is only us family, I would appreciate it if you were not quite so formal.”

I couldn't help but smile as I read between the lines. “Of course. But only when it's just family.”

Funaho smiled. “I see that Yoshō and Ayeka have been educating you.”

I grinned ruefully. “They're good teachers, even if they are quite sharp and critical. I can understand why though. The environment I would find myself in has quite a few hidden dangers.”

Funaho's expression turned a little more somber, though it still carried an oddly cheerful edge, like someone relishing a daunting task.

“Indeed it does, Mr. Grimm. That is part of why I am here today – to judge if you are truly suited to what would come your way.”

I sighed my trademark 'Ho boy, here we go now' sigh. It can be likened unto the sound a tired old dog makes when he sees a bouncing six-month-old baby making a beeline for his ears.

I then looked to Tenchi. “Oi, Tenchi?”

“Neh?”

“You think we can just call it a day here?”

“Sure. Thanks you your invention we got a week's worth of work done already.”

“A week's worth?” asked Funaho.

I nodded. “We managed to turn three fields in just a few hours using a power winch and an old horse-drawn plow.”

“Ah, how clever of you. In that case, I understand Sasami-chan is working on lunch right now. Perhaps we should join everyone else?”

“Sounds like a plan to me, Lady Funaho. Just give Tenchi and I a few minutes to pack everything in.”

It turned out that Lady Funaho was by herself. For sure, she had an entourage, but they had remained behind on her ship.

After a cheerfully talkative lunch, Funaho and I went up to my C-Space for an after-lunch tea and some... private discussion.

“Lady Seto mentioned a rather strange tea that you have. Something with a sweet and cool flavor that soothes stomachs and nerves?”

“Ah, that would be my Sleepytime tea. Would you like to try some?”

“Yes, please. I've been very curious ever since Seto told me about it.” Funaho's face then scrunched up adorably. “But she's so stingy she won't let me try any!”

I burst into stuttering snickers and Funaho looked at me in surprise.

“I'm sorry, I'm sorry,” I apologized once my laughing fit went away. “It's just... all the time you've been here you've been graceful and poised... and then suddenly...” I then mimicked the face Funaho had made and this time she began to titter behind her hand.

“No offense taken, Mr. Grimm. Actually, I'm glad to know that you can see the humor in such things.”

“Of course not, milady. I'll go ahead and get the tea.”

“Your space is a bit spartan,” called Funaho.

“A bit. It's just a temporary thing, though. In time I'll fill it up with all kinds of things. My garden, on the other hand, is a sight. Feel free to look while I work on this tea, milady.”

“Gladly. Where is it now?”

“Go up the stairs, turn away from the library, go past the windows that overlook the workshop, and keep going straight.” I smiled as I watched Funaho make her way up the stairs and down the passage to the garden room.

Soon enough, I was making my way over with one of my modest-sized tea pots when I heard Funaho cooing.

“Ooohhh, these are beautiful!” As I entered I found mesmerized by the blue flowers in the terrace next to my cacti and euphorbia. “Oh, Mr. Grimm! You must tell me about these flowers.”

I smiled as I set the tea aside on a table. “We call it Blue Bonnet. It's a flower that is very special to the people of my homeland – special enough that my people made it unlawful to cut the plants down when they're flowering.”

“Does it have trouble propagating?”

“A little. It's adapted for a harsh environment. The seeds have a very tough outer layer that keeps them from germinating for as long as two years. This helps ensure that natural erosion gets them into the ground.”

“How did you get these to germinate so soon?”

“I scarified the seeds. It's not exactly recommended, but it's the only way to effectively speed up the process. However, my goal with this terrace is to have them naturally germinating year-round in a year or two. As each generation goes to seed, I plant a mix scarified and unblemished seeds.”

Funaho hummed thoughtfully. “Clever. But don't you ever worry about nutrients?”

I shook my head. “They grow in alkali, nutrient-poor soil that drains very quickly.”

“I see. It's a real survivor then. Is it safe to touch?”

I grinned. “Back home, people lay in them and afterwards they pop right back up. No poison, no barbs, just wild and strong-willed beauty.”

“Might I have a few of your precious seeds, Mr. Grimm?”

Unbidden, the imagery of Blue Bonnets growing lush and plentiful among the trees of Jurai came to mind – a glorious and hopeful blue to grow alongside the somber yet lovely amethyst of Jurai's Royal Teardrop.

I didn't know if I would ever live to see it. But if that would be part of my legacy...

“Lady Funaho, it would honor me.” Without another word, I went to the cleverly hidden shed where I kept my tools and supplies. A moment later, I came back with the plain little envelope that bulged with a hidden treasure.

“To grow them naturally, you will need a patch of bare soil, poor of nutrients, fast-drying, and alkali. Cover these seeds with a thin layer of soil. In the spring and the autumn, water them liberally twice a week and no more. They favor bright sun and warm weather. Once the protective shell has worn away within a year or so, the seeds will start to grow and in a few weeks you will have a carpet of these wonderful flowers.”

“Two years is a little long to wait for flowers,” Funaho said with a smile as she accepted the packet of seeds.

“You've lived a long time, Lady Funaho. And you have centuries ahead of you yet. Two years is a passing moment in comparison.” I sighed heavily. “What I would do with centuries.”

“What would you do with centuries, Garrick?” she asked with that same smile as she motioned to the table with the tea.

Her sudden use of my given name surprised me and I stumbled as I clumsily moved to the table, pulling out a chair and offering it to her. And then there was the question itself!

“What wouldn't I do?” I asked myself, barely cognizant of my pouring Funaho's tea and offering it to her before pouring a cup for myself. “I would learn everything I've ever wanted to know. Craftsmanship, mathematics, music, art, engineering... I could go on and on. I would build things. Things that are beautiful, magnificent, functional. I wouldn't fear the madness of the tortured artist for I would have all the time I needed to perfect my creations. And I would find someone... my match. We would have children, and raise them together. Love... I would love them so much, even if we do anger each other. And I would know the children of my children, and their children as well. I would be a beacon for my family, ever-present but not overpowering – a signal for them to track by no matter how far afield they may go.

“And I would search the galaxy for my special place... though I think I know where it would be... my own home. A place where I could find refuge and where I would watch the children of my family play. A place that is wild, yet amicable. Tranquil and vibrant.”

“It sounds nice,” Funaho said after sipping her tea. “Hmmm... I can see why Seto is so stingy now. At any rate... do you think it's a little isolationist? I know you speak of building things – public works I would assume. Yet you speak little of interacting with anyone outside of family.”

I shrugged as I sipped my own tea. “I am an isolationist by nature. In fact, when I was a child it was so bad that I was absolutely vicious towards anyone trying to dictate my actions to me. I desired to be free to do as I pleased, and to hell with anyone that felt otherwise. If that meant that I didn't have anyone to play with, then I was fine with that. I had my imagination and it went wild.

“Over time, my step-father knocked some sense into me, instilling into me that the world was a cold place and cared little for me and what I wanted to do. And my mother instilled into me a sense of empathy – of putting myself into another person's place and understanding their feelings. Especially pain. Pain was a big one for me. Even though I have such a tolerance for it – both physical and emotional – I still feel that I've had my fill of it. I just want to live a happy and tranquil life and I wish the same for anybody that crosses my path.

“But if anyone wishes to cause me pain... I would make theirs a world of hurt in return.”

“An interesting choice of words. It reflects in what I heard about your arrival. Ryoko broke your neck and caused you so much trouble, and yet you hold no ill will towards her because it was, by all accounts and considerations, an accident.”

I nodded solemnly. “Truth. I know Ryoko didn't really intend me any personal harm. I startled her, she reacted, and then regretted her action. Hell, she still regrets what happened, so I make sure to get her good and drunk on the nights it hits her hardest.”

Funaho smiled. “You care about her!”

I scoffed. “She's a likeable person, once you get past her abrasiveness. Of course, that's a relative thing. What Princess Ayeka considers abrasive and I consider abrasive are two different things. I wouldn't be lying if every now and then those two get into it, but at least I managed to get them to see a little more eye-to-eye.”

“That is something else I find interesting – that you got Ayeka to take a liking to you.”

I rolled my eyes a bit. “Not much to it. I just treated her like a person. Helped that we had some common interests – I couldn't have made this garden without her help.”

“Indeed. The Royal Teardrops are her signature.”

“Honestly, though, I have Sasami to thank the most. If not for her, I don't think I would have gotten my foot in the door, so to speak.”

Funaho nodded. “She speaks well of you. She's also worried about you. She says that you are so sad that it hurts to see you sometimes.”

I grimaced at that. “I wish she wasn't so perceptive sometimes... and I kinda wish you hadn't told me – it can lead to a negative feedback loop if I don't handle it right.”

Funaho gave me a flat look and said, “I think you're being a little dramatic there. And if what I heard of you is true, you should know I don't use that word lightly.”

I blinked at that. “Right. Sorry.”

Funaho then sighed and took a sip of her tea. “That aside... Sasami obviously hasn't spared any detail. Really, for me this is all a formality... and simply to satisfy my own curiosity. Besides, my husband wouldn't forgive me for adopting you without even meeting you in the first place.

“So, that said, I do have one important question to ask, Garrick: how *are* you doing?”

“It's been hard, you know,” I said honestly, “leaving it all behind. I have so many reminders of who I was and what I've been. I can't leave those parts of me behind, no matter how much it hurts to remember the past. If I do... then I might as well carve my own heart out. I'd hardly even be human anymore.”

Funaho had a sober look on her face. “I am sorry to hear that, Garrick. Trust me, I do wish I could help you by giving you a hug and telling you that mother will make it all better. Such is the plight of all mothers. We desperately wish to help our children by taking their burdens upon our own backs, when the better thing to do is let them work their dilemmas out for themselves. Regardless, you do seem to be holding up well under the burden of your grief.”

I sipped at my tea, contemplating her words and wondering what to say. In the end, though, there was really only one thing I could say to that.

“Thank you,” I said at barely more than a whisper. Funaho gave me a small, sad smile and we quietly enjoyed my little garden – a slice of Earth and Jurai smashed together.

“Katherine seems to like it here,” Funaho said at last as she eyed the seedling that stood in the very center of the garden surrounded by a small moat of clear, blue water.

“I'm glad that she does.”

“My husband will be pleased to see she is doing so well.”

“Will he be coming anytime soon?”

“No, not for some time. While your adoption into the family is technically all but said and done, Azusa wants to test your mettle. He's certain that longer you stay here with Tenchi then the more likely you are to come across a situation that will show your true character.”

I smiled despite myself. “Fine by me. I don't quite feel ready for dealing with Juraian High Society just yet.”

“Well, that settles that, then!” said Funaho with a smile. “That leaves us with only one other matter, Garrick: just how much do you know about us?”

I took a deep breath and let it out slow. “I know... quite a bit. The question is... how much do you want to change the future by knowing what I know?”

Funaho gave me a worried look. “Is it that bad?”

“The future?” I asked, a bit surprised. “No. Not really. There are troubles, believe me. But it's nothing insurmountable in the least. A question for a question, milady... do you trust Washu-chan? To do the right thing, that is.”

Funaho seemed to mull that over for a moment before saying, “I do trust her to do what's right... though I do wish she had the interests in the Empire in mind when she does so.”

“Then please, milady, trust Washu-chan to be my confidant. She understands better than anyone else just how dangerous my knowledge is.”

“And what if someone else finds out about you?” Lady Funaho replied with a sharp look.

I gave Funaho an equally sober look. “Then I will pray that Tsunami is able to keep my soul from harm because I will remove myself from the picture if I have to.”

I couldn't have shocked her more than if I had tried. “You would kill yourself?”

“I would do what I must to protect my family. I know it must sound extreme, and believe me, I'm not trying to discount the value of my life, but in the grand scheme of things... I would rather die before I permit any knowledge I have be used to do harm.”

Funaho sighed. “Seto told me you would be different. I had no idea what that old bat was setting me up for.”

That was so far out of left field that I couldn't stop the snerk from squeaking by.

Funaho arched an eyebrow. “Yes?”

“My apologies... but... 'old bat'?”

Funaho sighed once more. “Don't misunderstand, Garrick. I love that woman like she was my own mother... but like any mother, she can tend to become... overbearing.”

I laughed. I couldn't help it. “Oh man... and that would be putting it lightly.”

Funaho closed her eyes and sighed deeply. “And you would know for sure.”

“Well, of course, I met her a while ago.” I gave Funaho one of my wicked little smiles. Funaho gave me an odd look for a moment, then smiled wryly while shaking her head.

“Of course, simply knowing about her is far different from actually meeting her.” Funaho sighed and then went on, “So, is there anything that you would be willing to tell us?”

I had been giving some thought, and I felt I had just the thing for her. “Tell me... are you missing a tree-ship by the name of Bizen?”

Funaho blinked. “Why, yes. For quite some time, in fact. What do you know?”

“A lot,” I stated simply. “I can't tell you all the details, but Bizen will be appearing again sometime in the near future. When it does, don't bring an entire fleet. In fact, you'll want to try and get a First Generation Tree for that mission.”

“And you won't tell me more?”

“Nope. It could mess everything up if I do.”

“And there's no promises I can make?”

I sighed. "Milady... please don't take this as an insult... but one thing I've noticed about Juraians is that they tend to be a little capricious. It may have rubbed off on you over the centuries, and any loopholes I unknowingly leave will most like be taken advantage of. That, and I don't know you quite well enough yet."

Funaho smiled. "And it seems that I am defeated once again."

I blinked. "Oh, referring to when you tried to get Washu to make more Ryokos and Ryo-ohkis?"

"You're every bit as shrewd as she is."

"Well, at least we can say that wasn't her doing."

"Oh, it wasn't?" asked Funaho, puzzled at that.

"Nope. That was my..." Man, I wish it didn't hurt so much to think of them... "That was my family... from my old life." All I could do was stare off into the distance as I fought back the tears. I don't know how long it was until I felt a hand on mine. Snapping my gaze around, I found Funaho giving me an encouraging smile.

"I've read Sasami's letters, Garrick. I know about what you've lost, and I know that there is no way to give back what has been taken from you. The most I can be to you is a surrogate mother."

I looked over at Funaho and said, levelly, "If that's what you want, then what you need to do is get up and give me a hug."

Funaho's eyes widened in surprise, but then her face relaxed once more as she smiled and got up.

"I should have known," she said as she stepped behind me and wrapped me up in a motherly embrace. "After having one son already, I should have known what a sad little boy looks like... and what he needs the most."

Call me immature. Call me whatever you want.

But this.

Just this.

This made the world just a little more bearable.

Sure, I had Washu to patch me up... and then there was Sasami's own affections... But neither of those came close to a genuine hug from mom. Even if she was only filling in for your real mother.

Funaho left that afternoon.

I'd given her a gift of several cartons of Sleepytime tea to share between herself and Misaki.

That evening as I sat out on the deck sipping my evening tea, I heard Washu walk up next to me and plunk herself down.

"You've been quiet today."

"It's been a bit of a weird day for me."

Washu scoffed. "I bet. Lady Funaho isn't usually the touchy feely sort. She's making a special exception for you."

"I kinda gathered that. I just hope it didn't make her too uncomfortable."

"I don't think so," said Washu blithely. "You just reminded her about what it's like being a mom."

"It's a tough gig, that's for sure. I don't want to be a burden on her."

"It'll be fine. I know you'll definitely pull your own weight, just like you have been here."

"Pulling my own weight, huh? What the hell does that entail in the Royal Household? I mean, I've been hearing a lot about etiquette and ranks and such... But I've got no idea what the hell anyone does."

Washu shrugged. "Everybody's involved with the government in some way or another."

“Oh? Then what did Ayeka do before she went off to look for Yosho?”

“From what I understand, nothing much. Oh, there were things like entertaining ambassadors and such... but that was usually their children that Ayeka would entertain.”

“Ah yes. The whole big-sister thing.”

“Right. It also helps that she knew how to lay down the diplomacy when she needed to rein one of their children in.”

I snorted at that. “I think you meant 'gunboat diplomacy'.”

“Heh. That too.”

For a moment we just sat there, content to listen to the sounds of the night.

“Hey, Washu-chan, level with me.”

“What?”

“Do they honestly want me? As a son, I mean... Sure, I bet they'd love to have some new blood in the family that could shake things up without going overboard... But will they really think of me as Their Son?”

Washu sighed. “Funaho wasn't kidding when she spoke with me earlier. You really are just a scared little kid underneath it all, aren't you?”

I scoffed. “Story of my freakin' life, Washu-chan. Is it really paranoia when there's someone out there that is actually out to get you?”

“Eh-heh-heh. Point taken. But really, you should give Funaho and Azusa the benefit of a doubt. After all, they're doing the same with you.”

“Et tu, point.” I sighed. “Either way. I don't have much choice, do I? I just hope they don't do anything to hurt me.”

“I don't think they will, Garrick. It'd wouldn't make any sense.”

“Yeah, your right. Just being freakin' insecure right now. Screw this,” I said as I suddenly emptied the tea cup into the lake, got up, and made way for my C-Space. “I need a real drink.”

It was a day like any other.

Springtime.

Crisp.

Cool.

Green.

New.

The chill of winter still held the land in a stranglehold, but the light of the sun and the will of the plants would not be thwarted. The seasons would turn, as inevitable as time itself.

In short, it was Sunday and Ayeka, Sasami, Mihoshi all had to wear their winter-weight clothing.

It was a rare thing for the Princesses. Jurai enjoyed a perpetual temperate climate not broken by seasonal shifts... or rather, they had seasonal shifts, just nothing as drastic as Earth's. Fortunately, Ayeka and Sasami were no strangers to travel, and when they had left Jurai they packed an assortment of clothing for different climates.

Still, it was a novelty for them to be able to enjoy the full range of their wardrobes over the course of the year. Therefore, when they showed up at the shrine they were decked out in the nicest winter clothing I have ever seen.

Of course, I didn't get to notice right away. I had my hands full in dealing with Yosho.

“C'mon old timer,” I jeered cheerfully amid a flurry of thrusts and parries. “Don't tell me that's all you go-YIPE!”

“Watch yourself, boy,” said Yosho with a grin.

“Only a boy to you!” I fired back. “And don't encourage my Peter Pan complex.”

“I don't need to. You encourage it yourself.”

“Oh my, so energetic!” came Ayeka's voice.

“Gar-nii-san looks good,” added Sasami.

“Go for it, Onii-chan!” called out Mihoshi.

“I hope they stop soon,” said Tenchi a little worriedly. “I think Grandpa's having a little too much fun.”

“DON'T TEMPT ME!” I yelled. “I SWEAR I'LL TAKE THIS INTO THE TREETOPS!” Free running meets swordplay. Where are your ninja now?

That actually made Yosho pause. “We'll stop here for now. I was getting hungry anyhow.”

“Darn,” I cursed half-heartedly with a smile. If I didn't know any better I'd swear there were times that I made Yosho, for all his centuries, feel at least a little out of his depth.

“Oh don't be so put out, Brother,” said Ayeka with a grin. “We brought food.”

“Ah, thanks! I could definitely do food right now. By the way, where's Ryoko? She's not one to miss out on something like this.”

“She mentioned something about extra time needed to prepare,” Sasami put in. “But I can't imagine what she might be up to.”

Tenchi smiled. “I wouldn't worry about it. Ryoko is Ryoko. She'll be fine.” We all set out the food and began our impromptu picnic.

“I hope that you all enjoy this,” said Ayeka with uncharacteristic shyness. “I... did make this all myself.”

Tenchi and Yosho both went white as sheets. I looked a question at Sasami, though, and she nodded smiling.

“She's right,” Sasami confirmed for us. “I just supervised her.”

“Ah. In that case, I say we all dig in. It's got Sasami-chan's stamp of approval.” With that, everyone loaded up so quickly that I had to keep myself from laughing. Shaking my head, and went in to get my own before it all disappeared.

I sat next to Sasami and whispered, “Did Ayeka-imouto really make all this?”

Sasami nodded vigorously. “Nee-san really did work very hard today. But then, I had to work really hard to make sure she didn't mess up. Still, I think we can count this as a victory.” And with that, she stuffed a piece of sashimi in her mouth and chewed happily.

I smiled. “Wonder of all wonders.”

“Hey! Is this a private party, or can anyone just crash it?”

“Oooh that voice!” said Ayeka angrily as she whipped around, glowering at Ryoko. “Boors are strictly prohibited at Royal Family functions.” She then smiled. “However, if one can show themselves to be a person of sophistication and class, that may be another matter. It also doesn't hurt if you bring something for the buffet.”

“Is that so?” said Ryoko with a grin. “Then allow me to make up for my entrance with a grand presentation!” She then closed her eyes and spread her arms wide, intoning, “Oh great one of the depths, come forth!”

And just like that, a massive tuna appeared from Ryoko's subspace pocket.

“WHOAH!” I found myself saying – even though I had a feeling this event was coming anyhow, it still didn't prepare me for how big that fish was. “That's gonna be a lot of leftovers.”

Ayeka, however, simply smiled and said, “We have yet to be impressed, Miss Ryoko.”

Ryoko grinned back. “Alright then. Let the barbeque begin!” Electricity crackled and arced through the air as Ryoko bent the atmospheric ionization to her will, generating a wicked static

electrical imbalance that could only resolve itself one way... and Ryoko had the tuna interposed in the space that energy wanted to go through.

It was a light and sound show I would not soon forget. However, I didn't let it distract me from the more important thing.

“Ryoko!” I called out loud. “Incoming attack! Put the fish away!”

At first she was confused, but then Ryo-Ohki snarled angrily, startling Sasami into worry, and Mihoshi's own early-warning system went off, much to her confusion. Ryoko's eyes went wide in shock as she put two-and-two together, and she hurriedly slipped the massive electro-roasted tuna back into her subspace pocket. And not a moment too soon when the massive beam of energy blasted through right where the fish had been and impacted not too far away.

“Garrick!” snapped out Ryoko. “What in the hell is going on!?”

Tenchi shushed her before I could answer. “Someone's coming!”

Lo and behold, she came- not striding, but floating over the crater she'd made and over towards us, accompanied by her own amused laughter. And while everyone stopped dead in their tracks, shocked at what they were seeing and hearing, I stepped up to the front.

“I've been looking for you,” she said in Ryoko's voice, but a different inflection. In fact, she looked just like Ryoko, except for the odd, crescent shaped markings on her cheeks. She also wore some weird one-piece suit with the shoulder-pads from hell. “So, you're the one! You did in Kagato, didn't you?”

Before anyone could say something, I put my hand to my heart and went on dramatically, “I'm flattered, cutey, really I am. But that's just not me. However, if you're willing to play the question-for-answer game, I'm perfectly willing to tell you everything.”

“HEEEEEHHHH!?” yelled everyone behind me.

“Are you insane!?” cried out Ryoko.

I cast a devil-may-care look back at our Ryoko over my shoulder. I then called out in my best TV-Man voice, “Popular opinion on that matter still needs to be tabulated. Current polling points to 'Yes!,'” and there I snapped my fingers smartly and continued, “however, we'll need to get back to you when the final tally is in. Back to you, Gar-kun.”

Let me tell you, getting that sort level of shock and confusion out of Ryoko is so. Fucking. Satisfying. I swear I was wearing a shit-eating grin for weeks after that.

Turning back to Ryoko 2.0, I went on, “So, anyhow, shall I start or do you want the honors?”

“What the hell was that!?” snapped Other Ryoko.

Oh man, this was so epic. I won't quit smiling for weeks.

“That was me fucking with everybody's heads. C'mon! Give me a tough one next time. My turn anyhow! Your name is Minagi, right?”

“How the hell did you know that!?” Damn, she was playing along and not even realizing it!

“I'll take that as a 'yes!'” I beamed. “As for your answer...” I then adopted a posture of mock solemnity, with my hand placed reverently over my chest. “I bear the terrible burdens of being an interdimensional traveler. Such is my knowledge that, if I am not careful, I can DESTROY THE UNIVERSE!” It's no wonder my eyes are brown. Whenever the mood strikes my fancy, I'm always just so full of it. “MY TURN! Does your mother know you go around wearing such scandalous things?”

“THIS IS MY BATTLE ARMOR! And I don't have a mother!”

“The hell you don't! Ryoko over there has got a mother, much to her chagrin, and you two look exactly alike! Even with the universe being as big as it is, that's a pretty damn small coincidence. But just to be safe!” I slapped my C-pod and brought up the communication app with a few flamboyant

taps. “Washu-chan! Get your cute little 20,000 year old tush over here! Got something only you can settle and it needs to be settled ASAP. Code Pond Strider.”

“WOO-HOO! *Why didn't you say so sooner!*” came Washu's voice tinnily over the C-Pod. My grin began to take on dangerous proportions. I could tell by the frightened looks people were giving me. Except for Sasami. She looked like she wanted to laugh so badly but didn't want to break the effect I was having.

Code Pond Strider, by the way, was something Washu and I had come up with. If I ever remembered something IMPORTANT and it was happening RIGHT NOW, then I'd call in a Code Pond Strider and shit would get real.

As for Washu, she quit faffing around with whatever she was doing and opened a gateway to get directly here.

“Heya Gar-kun, what's goi-” and then she caught sight of Minagi and completely spazzed out. “GYAUGH! The hell!? I think I should have recalled *that!*” Everyone behind us facevaulted, Sasami included. The little imp *did* know where babies came from, after all.

I leaned down and stage whispered to Washu in a conspiratorial fashion. “Neh, Washu-chan... You did say you used one of your ova to create Ryoko. You now make me wonder how you went about it.”

“That's not important right now, Garrick!!!” Washu yelled in by ear, giving it a good tug for emphasis. That in exchange for trolling Washu-chan? So. Fucking. Worth it. Lady Seto will be so pleased to hear it. She then huffed and composed herself, saying, “Alright, missy. Tell me right now who created you.”

“I think I've answered enough questions!” said Minagi irately.

“Not by a longshot, Minagi,” I said, now taking a gentler, but still delightedly chiding tone with her. “You see, there's so much we'd like to know about you. Granted, I can understand the interest in Tenchi-kun. He's a swell guy and all despite having the balls to take on Kagato and win.”

Minagi blinked, then looked to Tenchi. “It was you?”

Tenchi just chuckled nervously and rubbed the back of his head while everyone else began to edge away from him.

Minagi then turned back to me. “You're lying,” she accused. “I bet it was you instead!”

I laughed. “Flattery will get you everywhere with me, but unfortunately, Minagi, that just ain't the truth. Check your scans of me! I'm just a human with no special powers aside from a fuckton of health points and a very odd collection of skills. I don't have anything that would let me take on Kagato head on and win like Tenchi-kun did.”

“Oh no! I'm not gonna let your slippery tongue make a fool out of me! I'm taking you with me back to my master and none of you had better stop me!”

“Over my dead body!” snarled Ryoko as she suddenly interposed herself between us.

Minagi smiled. “I can make that a reality if you want me to.”

“THAT'S ENOUGH!” I snapped, my voice cracking like a gunshot. Ryoko and Minagi both looked at me, surprise written on both their faces in differing shades – bewilderment on Ryoko's and annoyance with Minagi.

It's amazing how quickly the situation can change, as well as how quickly we can shift gears to cope.

I leveled a sober glare at Minagi. “Minagi, would you assure my safety and wellbeing while in your care?”

She smiled. “Oh! So you're willing to come peacefully, eh? Well, what if I were to test you right here and right now?”

I shrugged. "You'd probably kill me because I'm not your man. Tenchi is the only one that can activate the true Lightning Eagle Blade that was used to kill Kagato."

"And how do I know you're telling the truth?" said Minagi darkly as she activated an energy blade. It was very much like Ryoko's, except Minagi's had a hilt.

"Tenchi," I called out without turning. "Do it."

"What!?" cried out the teen-age boy. "What are you talking about?"

"Teeennnchhiii," I called out again, this time stressing my voice. "She is not fucking around anymore. And neither should you, because if you don't, I'm dead, and the girls are all gonna be extremely unhappy about that." I could almost see the expectant looks everyone was giving Tenchi right at that moment.

"God Dammit!" snarled Tenchi suddenly. "Why did you have to put me on the spot like that, Garrick!?"

"Tenchi, knock it off and man-up!" I snapped, this time turning to glare at the young man – I didn't care if Minagi was still there with her blade at the ready. I knew that she wouldn't attack an unarmed opponent, let alone one with their back turned. "Don't you dare tell me you expect me to wave a magic wand and make all this unpleasantness disappear, because for all my foreknowledge, I can't do that. And I would if I could, Tenchi, but unfortunately life just isn't fair. But you should know that already... No one your age... should have to kill a another man... no matter how evil he's become..."

"But life's just not fair."

The look on Tenchi's face was almost indescribable. There was terror there, and confusion, revulsion, and trepidation. There was the dawning realization that no matter how much Tenchi wanted it to be otherwise, he could no longer afford to be just a normal Japanese boy. I then turned and glared at Minagi, saying, as though challenging her personally,

"And I know that better than anyone else here."

Minagi's resolve faltered. "Who are you?" she asked slowly. I held my glare for a moment, giving the answer some thought.

"You want to know who I am? I'll tell you. I'm the poor piece of shit that someone didn't want in their Universe enough to complain when I got yanked out by someone else. Hell, for all I know the landlord himself probably threw me out and I just got picked out of the garbage by some other random omnipotent being.

"I had a family that fell apart, an education that went nowhere, and a job that couldn't be bothered to give a shit because the economy was fucked to hell.

"But now I'm here. I got a new name, a new family, and a whole new education. I dunno about the job yet, but Badass Motherfucker of the Universe In Training has a nice ring to it, don'tcha think?"

"The name's Garrick Grimm, and if you think that killing me is gonna be easy... well, you might be right, but my new family won't make it easy for you.

"Killing Kagato was just the tip of the iceberg, Minagi. Don't push these people too far."

We all fell silent at that as Minagi and I stared each other down. Suddenly, Yosho went to Tenchi and handed over the Tenchi-ken.

"Garrick has done what he can," said the old man. "Now it is your turn."

The young man looked to Yosho and finally his expression softened, then shifted into one of resolution as he nodded, accepting the Master Key.

"Let's give these two some room to work with here," I said as I backed away. The others followed my lead, but as we did so, Ayeka whispered to me.

"Dear Brother, are you certain that Lord Tenchi will prevail?"

"As long as he quits screwing around and takes this seriously, then he'll be fine. But believe me, I understand why you're worried."

“Ah, yes,” sighed Ayeka. “He is so...”

“Boneheaded,” I finished for her.

Ayeka gave me a dirty look. “I wouldn't have quite put it that way, but yes.”

I smiled at her warmly. “We'll talk about it later, Dear Sister. These two are about to start.”

And start they did, with Minagi charging at Tenchi, her movements were swift, graceful, and economical with god only knows how many centuries of training and experience.

Tenchi, being taught by a man that had centuries of experience himself, reacted and interposed his blade cleanly against Minagi's.

Minagi then smiled as she all but leered at Tenchi. “And yet... the power of the Lightning Eagle Sword that my Master seeks should be much more powerful than this!”

“What the!?” cried Tenchi, nearly flinching.

I had to stop Ryoko and Ayeka with my hands on their shoulders.

“Don't! He's gotta figure this out on his own or else he'll never be able to summon it when he needs it.”

“But Brother!” cried out Ayeka. “Tenchi is going to-”

“Be just fine,” said Yoshō, steadying his sister.

“Big Brother?” whispered Ayeka.

“Garrick is right,” Yoshō intoned as he watched the fight intently. “Tenchi needs to learn how to fight for himself... but he'd better learn quick!”

I watched as well and I was quick to notice something. Minagi wasn't really fighting Tenchi with everything she had. It was all too pat, too easy for her... In fact, it seemed like she was fighting Tenchi much how Yoshō would when he wanted to assess Tenchi's skills!

It happened so quickly that I barely caught it – a sudden shift in Minagi's face from determined to displeased – and then a brutal and harsh blow that sent Tenchi flying until he hit the trunk of a nearby tree.

“BROTHER!” I cried out as I sprinted to his prone form. Being so quick on my feet, I got to him before anyone else. But I barely had time to even see if he was breathing still.

“I've had enough of this farce,” snarled Minagi. “Now I fight you, Garrick Grimm.”

“GARRICK! CATCH!” shouted Yoshō. I looked just in time to snatch something long, slender and brown out of the air, and then use it to parry Minagi's strike against me.

As Minagi continued to batter me, I dimly recognized that I had a bokuto – a Japanese wooden sword – in my hands. While made of mere wood, they are still quite dangerous – Miyamoto Musashi, a samurai who is all but legendary in the history of Japan, killed many men using the wooden weapons.

What was more, there was something familiar about the weapon – a strange sense that there was someone standing over my shoulder, protectively watching over me.

I didn't really have time to think about it, though, because Minagi was wailing away at me – fully intent on smearing me worse than what she did with Tenchi.

“Why are you holding back!?” she screamed. “Fight me!”

“CRAZY WOMAN!” I snapped back between blows, being driven back with each strike. “I CAN'T!” I suddenly lost my footing and spilled over onto my back.

“Then you'll die,” Minagi intoned as she then began to wind up for one massive strike – I could actually feel the hairs on my neck standing on end!

Oh man, this is going to HURT.

“Leave my Brother ALONE!” came a voice...

And suddenly Tenchi – in his Lighthawk Armor plowed through Minagi, smashing her into the earth with his Lighthawk Shield.

“Are you alright!?” asked Tenchi frantically, the immediate threat handled.

“Yeah, just a bit shaken,” I replied as I got back up again. “Fortunately, Washu-chan's upgrades work, otherwise I would have folded like a wet cardboard box with the first blow.”

I went over and inspected the Minagi-shaped hole in the ground, then looked back over to everyone else.

“I think we're good here,” I called back to them.

With that, Yosho, followed by the others began to approach. As they did, I finally took a moment to look at the bokuto in detail. It resembled the Tenchi-ken, but not as elaborate, and there was still that odd sense I was getting from the wooden weapon – a strange feeling of warmth and comfort.

“Yosho, what is this?” I asked my adoptive older brother.

Yosho smiled. “Every now and then a branch will fall from Funaho. When it does, I usually set it aside to make use of it later – they are her gifts to me, after all. This bokuto I carved from one of her branches. I was originally going to give it to Tenchi-kun once he was ready for it... but instead he wound up finding the Master Key. So, I suppose that you can use it instead.”

“Thank you, elder brother. It really saved my ass.”

Yosho nodded, then went on, “Of course, you do know that this means I'll be stepping up your and Tenchi's training.”

I scoffed softly and gave Yosho a sidelong look. “I would never have guessed,” I said dryly. Yosho chuckled and patted me on the shoulder. In the meantime, Ryoko had begun an effort to try and extract Minagi from her hole while everyone else stood by watching.

I sidled up next to Washu. “Take a note, Washu-chan. Temporal momentum is definitely in effect here.”

“Oh? How so?”

“In the timeline from the mangas I read? Ryoko was the one to originally do that to Minagi... and afterwards Minagi had amnesia. I'd bet all my booze that she's not gonna remember anything but her name for a while after this.”

“I see. So there are limits to exactly how much you can change.”

I shrugged. “We've already seen that I can make changes. I mean, look at the girls. They don't really fight anymore, and when they do it's all just for laughs.”

“I'm still amazed at how well you handled that,” said Washu with genuine appreciation.

I scoffed at that. “You try being the oldest out of seven Type-A personalities.”

Washu snorted bemusedly. “I don't know why I keep forgetting about that.”

Washu got the hairy eyeball from me in return. “Probably the same reason you keep forgetting about taking Mihoshi into account.”

And with that, Washu face-vaulted. I just laughed softly and went to help Ryoko pull out Minagi.

“Need a hand?” I asked as I approached.

“Sure,” replied Ryoko. “Get her other arm. She's stuck pretty good.”

Ryoko is a few inches taller than Tenchi – which puts her at about my height. And Minagi was, more or less, Ryoko's twin. So, when Ryoko and I tugged the unconscious woman loose from the Earth and Ryoko let her go, Minagi sagged against me just so that it felt like a lovers embrace.

I shot a querying look at Ryoko. She just smiled smugly... as did Ayeka as she came over and exchanged a fist-bump with Ryoko – something they had picked up from me my first month here – and Sasami suddenly popped up between them with a camera.

CLICK!

I barely contained an explosion of laughter as I figured out that I had just been had by The Pirate *and* The Princess! Those adorable little imps! I loved them like the meddling little sisters they were.

Minagi picked that moment to start coming around as she stirred in my arms.

“Ah... huh?” she said as she blinked blearily. “Where am I?”

“You're on the Masaki Estate in Japan on the planet Earth – third planet from a main-sequence yellow star in the Sagittarius arm. Easy there. You took quite a knock just now. My little brother doesn't know his strength all that well.”

Ryoko, I should note, has very pretty eyes when she permits herself to be seen that way. Minagi, of course, had the same eyes... but hers had a certain quality that Ryoko lacked... or rather, that Ryoko didn't permit to show through very often.

As she locked her eyes on me I could not help but notice that fact... and she in turn slowly turned bright red.

Ayeka and Ryoko were positively dying from asphyxiation and Sasami looked absolutely pleased.

I shook my head at the three and then looked to Minagi. “Can you stand?”

She nodded her head, her eyes still locked on me. I carefully steadied Minagi and she stood without any problems.

“There! You don't seem to be any worse for wear. So, now that you've tested your blade against Tenchi's maybe you can tell us what this is all about, eh?”

“Uhm,” said Minagi nervously.

“Well, go on,” I encouraged her. “We're all reasonably nice people... though I might have to beat back Ryoko with a stick.”

“Hey!” Ryoko replied sharply from the sidelines.

“Uhm... well...” Minagi started, pushing her index finger-tips together nervously. “I... was hoping you could tell me what I'm doing here.”

Ryoko blasted off into LEO in sheer shock, knocking Tenchi flat on his ass while doing so, and Ayeka face vaulted. Sasami and Ryo-Ohki smiled nervously, a little unsure of how to handle this revelation and Mihoshi was her usual clueless self.

Washu simply raised an eyebrow. “Innnnterrrrresstinnngg.”

I just smiled and shook my head.

Good times. Good times indeed.

“Her name is Minagi,” I began, now seated at the table with everyone else staring at me intently. Minagi herself was confined to Ayeka and Sasami's room. “I don't know about her last name, but I do know that her creator, who she thinks of as a father, is a Juraian named Yakage.”

“Ah,” said Washu brightly. “I thought I recognized his handiwork.”

“You know him?” asked Tenchi.

Washu nodded. “He was an assistant of mine back when I worked with Kagato. He's a master swordsmith – that was his research topic: creating the greatest sword in the universe. In fact, information in his thesis went into making Ryoko's sword.”

“So does he know me as well?” asked Ryoko.

“Yup!” answered Washu. “He was actually involved with your creation, Ryoko.”

“Does that mean you created Minagi too, Washu?” asked Sasami – the only person present allowed to not add the -chan suffix.

“I didn't know about Minagi,” replied Washu thoughtfully as she bit into a manju-bun. “But I do have a theory! I suspect that he stole a bit of Ryoko's DNA when we were in the early stages. A bright lad, though a bit too bright perhaps.”

“OH!” cried out Mihoshi as she put two-and-two together. “I get it! That means Ryoko and Minagi are sisters!”

“Half-sisters,” I put in.

“Eh?” everyone said as they looked to me.

“It’s a little more like the relationship between Yosho and Ayeka and Sasami. They share the same father, but have different mothers. But usually such families don’t really recognize the distinction... though I think Ryoko might.”

“Whatever!” grumbled Ryoko. “It still doesn’t explain anything.”

I rolled my eyes. “Ryoko, haven’t you been paying attention? Yakagi makes swords and wants to make the greatest one in the universe. Supposedly the one at the top spot now is Tenchi’s.”

“That’s not what I meant!” snapped Ryoko. “I mean, why would he create a clone of me anyhow?”

“Ah,” I sighed. “That. Well, Ryoko, thing is that Yakage used his own DNA as well when he created Minagi. You see, she is not only Washu-chan’s daughter, but his as well.”

Ryoko was aghast. “But... why would he do that!?”

“Ryoko... if you want the answer to that question, then you need to go look at yourself in the mirror, long and hard, and ask yourself this question: Why do I want to bear Tenchi’s children?”

To everyone’s astonishment, Ryoko turned bright red, and then disappeared as she teleported. Washu cackled wickedly. “DAYUM Gar-kun! That was good!”

“Thank you, thank you!” I said as I performed the entertainer’s bow to all sides of the table. “I’ll be here all week! Try the Miso – it’s divine! But at any rate, Yakage isn’t going to be content in waiting for Minagi to report back. He doesn’t have much time left.”

“Why’s that?” asked Washu.

“He’s been cloning himself to extend his lifespan. Unfortunately, he seems to have lost his original DNA pattern somewhere along the way because now his successive cloning is degrading at an increasingly rapid rate. Even with advance care, I’d say he’s got a month or two. Tops.”

Washu sighed. “And of course, knowing him he’s pushing himself to the limit. So you can take those two months and make it a week instead. This isn’t good.”

“Nope,” I chirped. “Somehow we gotta figure out a way to get him to cool his jets a bit. Maybe a few choice words about how you’ve been trying to work out where Tenchi’s power comes from?”

Washu sighed. “That *might* get him to slow down and rethink his approach to the situation. Unfortunately, if he’s still the man I knew back then – and he most likely is judging from what I’ve seen and heard so far – then he’s gonna want to rush out and put his hypothesis to the test right away.”

“And that being can his latest creation beat out Tenchi’s Light-Hawk Sword.”

“Indeed,” sighed Washu.

“Well, forewarned is forearmed,” said Tenchi. “We’ll just deal with it as it comes.”

Yosho nodded. “Indeed. I don’t think we’ll get any further just talking about it. Dinner will be ready soon regardless.”

That evening I sat outside on the dock by myself with my iPad.

Having that was both a joy and a sorrow. The tablet computer had more processing power than most computers on Earth at this time do. But, because it was so far ahead of its time there was no support available for it. Anytime anything went wrong with it I was on my own.

Fortunately, it was an Apple product, so very little went wrong with it anyhow.

Bundled up against the cold, I was working on a plan of action to take against Yakage when he would show up tomorrow. Granted, I wasn’t laying out some grand strategy, just some basic scenarios. I sighed as I paused to stretch and gazed across the lake at Yosho’s tree, Funaho.

“I know you like me, Funaho, but why did you give me a seed to raise?”

“Who are you talking to?”

I didn't jump – you get used to people sneaking up on you here.

I turned to see who it was and found Minagi hovering a few feet over me.

“Oh, hey Minagi. Couldn't sleep?”

Minagi sighed. “No. I talked to Sasami. She's real nice, wanting me to stay here and be part of the family... but...”

“You're uneasy about it,” I finished for her.

“Yeah. I know she likes me, but I'm not too sure about everyone else here.”

“Well, like I said before, we're all pretty friendly here... but sometimes you gotta beat Ryoko back with a stick. Isn't that right, Ryoko?”

“BWAH!?” I heard Ryoko shout behind me.

“EEYYYYIIIEEE!” squealed Minagi... who promptly dove... well, to my side, and tried to make herself as small as possible to hide from Ryoko while clinging to me for dear life.

I gave Ryoko an exasperated look – sure enough, there she was with a ridiculously huge mallet with kanji that read, 'Memory Restoration Hammer'.

“Ryoko, I have got *no idea* where the hell you got that thing from, but I want you to put it back right now!”

“Oh, c'mon Gar-kun!” pouted Ryoko. “Don't be such a killjoy!”

“I mean it Ryoko. You know that's not gonna help her and friends don't do that kind of shit.”

“Oh fine!” Ryoko grumped. “Did you really have to play the 'Friend' card?”

“Of course I did! Look at this poor girl- she's terrified out of her wits!”

I wrapped an arm around Minagi as Ryoko came closer to get a better look at Minagi. At first, Ryoko wore a disdainful expression and Minagi whimpered as she came closer. Suddenly, Ryoko put on a scary face.

“BOOGA-BOOGA-BOOGA!”

Minagi screamed. I hate to admit it, but she made it seem cute. Of course, all that noise summoned help in a hurry.

“What the hell's gotten into you Ryoko!” yelled Washu as she popped up from nowhere and grabbed Ryoko by the ear. “You are coming back to the lab with me and you're gonna explain to me, in detail, why you think hitting Minagi over the head with that hammer is gonna fix things!”

Ryoko could only splutter as Washu dragged her away.

I then turned to Minagi who was still clinging to me, and wearing a face that was torn between a fervent WTF, and bawling her eyes out. With one arm coiled around her still, I gave Minagi a comforting hug.

“It'll be okay Minagi. Ryoko will come around and before you know it you two will be sisters.”

“But why does she hate me so much?” whimpered Minagi.

I sighed. “Well, it's because you knocked out her boyfriend and then nearly killed me right before you lost your memory.”

“But... I don't remember! I have no idea why I would do that! I don't understand why you would even touch me after I did that.”

“Because you were under programming at that time. And whatever Tenchi did to you wiped that programming away completely. So, I'm being nice to you because I see the real and true Minagi right now. And the real Minagi is a very sweet girl that doesn't like doing mean things to people.”

Minagi gazed at me for a short moment, then let go of me at last... but she didn't get up.

Instead, she shifted around so she was seated comfortably by me and leaned her head on my shoulder.

“Thank you for believing in me, Garrick.”

I said nothing. I just gave her a squeeze with the arm that was still wrapped around her. Minagi sighed contently and nothing more.

We watch the night sky as the clouds scudded by for a few minutes in quiet contentment until I noticed that my eyes were starting to get heavy.

“Minagi?” I said with a yawn.

“Hmmm?” she said, herself sounding sleepy as well.

“I need to get to bed. And I think you do as well.”

“Ah, Garrick?” asked Minagi.

“Yes?”

“Would you mind if I slept with you tonight?”

Well that was quick, I thought wryly to myself.

“I only have one bed in my room, Minagi. Don't you have a bed made up in Ayeka and Sasami's room?”

“There is... but I feel that I'll be safer in your room instead.”

“You sure?” I said with a mildly warning tone. “Because sharing a bed with another person has profound undertones, both here on Earth and on Jurai.”

“I don't mind,” Minagi replied with a nervous smile. “You're... so nice to me. Sasami is nice, too... and I guess the others are... but you're the only one that will hold me like this. And... it feels nice.”

I sighed. “Alright then. You can come with me. I'd be lying anyhow if I said that I didn't find you attractive.” And then, to her surprise, I pecked her on the cheek right before I got up.

There'll be hell to pay in the morning, I thought to myself as Minagi jumped up and grabbed ahold of me, making it tricky to walk down the boardwalk, *but it just might be worth it*.

“WHAT IS THAT!?”

“HUH!?” I cried out, popping up like a pop-tart from the toaster. And then I registered the sound – that of Megumi Hayashibara's adorably bubbly voice filling the air with the opening theme from Love Hina.

On the roof looking up at the sky, the sunlight is beautiful

Looking up to the sky, my whole body fills with energy

“That would be my alarm clock,” I said with a sheepish grin to a wide-eyed Minagi.

That's so wonderful! Just being alive!

Let's never stop or give up

“You're kidding, right?”

“Nope.”

Say goodbye to the confusion of yesterday

These feelings are bubbling up and boiling over

No matter how many times they come back, these flowers will bloom

Memories are always a sweet place to retreat

But if you break from them, you can live for tomorrow

A blessed time has arrived, so reach out your hands

“A little bubbly, isn't it?”
“It helps put this place into perspective for me.”
“I guess I can see that.”

*This lovely and gentle skin, these hands have not yet reached
If I close my eyes this image expands, a fascinating seed*

“Oh, no subtext there!”

*That's so wonderful! Just being alive!
Let's never stop, I want to see how it was before*

“Oh hush you,” I said as I smacked the snooze button at last. As much as I liked hearing that song some mornings, I didn't want to give Minagi too much ammo – she was feisty when she was firing on all cylinders... albeit a friendly sort of feisty.

And then Minagi sniffed at the air. “What's that smell?”

I smiled. “Coffee.”

“Which is?”

“A brew of roasted and ground beans that braces you for the day to come. It's kinda salty and bitter straight-up, so a lot of people experiment with different roasting styles, flavor infusions, sweeteners and creamers. Care for a cup?”

“I guess. Ah... do you have a toilet in here?”

“Through the curtain, across the common space, and inside that alcove there. Door is to the right.”

“Thanks,” Minagi replied as she teleported to the spot I indicated. With a smile, I scooted over to the foot of the bed and went down the ladder of my loft bed.

Minagi, it turns out, isn't much of a coffee person... until you put a good dollop of amaretto cream in her breakfast blend, then she starts asking for more.

I had to cut her off at the second cup for fear that she'd turn into Calvin on a sugar rush – there are just some things mortal men are not meant to see.

Besides, breakfast was about ready by then.

“Ready to face the music?” I asked.

Minagi sighed. “I hope they don't make too big a deal out of this.”

I scoffed bemusedly. “I did warn you last night.”

“You did,” Minagi replied fatalistically. “Alright then... let's get this over with.”

I opened the door...

...And was promptly tackled by Ryo-Ohki, who transformed from Cabbit to Humanoid mid-flight.

“Dooouuuf!” I said succinctly as I went to the deck.

“Nya?” said Ryo-Ohki questioningly. She then looked up and saw Minagi. “NYA!”

“OOF!” cried out Minagi as she was gut-checked by the Cabbit-girl.

“Eeyeah,” I drawled as I picked myself up. “She's energetic that way.”

“Ah, there you are, Dear Brother,” came Ayeka's voice. “And I see you have Minagi with you, too. Sasami will be glad to hear that – she was worried when she didn't come back to bed last night.”

Ayeka then leaned over and whispered to me in Old High Juraian, "Dear Brother, you haven't been tending the garden, have you?"

I did mention that I was learning the language, did I not?

"Of course not, beloved sister," I replied in the same tongue. "While we find each other attractive, we're not quite there yet. Really, she just didn't want to sleep alone. Like a child after they have a bad nightmare."

Ayeka smiled at that. "So I see."

"What are you guys talking about?" asked Minagi.

"Private family joke," I replied blithely in Japanese. "Trust me, you would have had to have been there for it."

Ayeka got the irony of that statement right away and dissolved into a fit of ill-suppressed giggles.

Minagi could only blink in confusion as she said, "I guess so."

Needless to say, that second statement didn't help my sister any, either.

Momentarily, we managed to get downstairs to the Kitchen with Ayeka back to normal.

"Yaaayyy! Minagi's here!" cried out Sasami as she ran over and glomped Minagi. "We're going to have so much fun today, Minagi!"

I grinned and leaned over to Ayeka's side and whispered, falsetto-toned, in her ear using Old High Juraian once more. Oh yes, I was going to abuse the hell out of that.

"We're gonna play dress up dolls, we're gonna paint our nails, and then we'll have a tea party..."

Ayeka glared at me, but she could quite keep the grin off her face as she smacked my shoulder. God, it felt good to have a family again.

"So, you and Minagi, huh?" asked Ryoko as we peeled potatoes together for the night's dinner. Minagi herself was helping Sasami with preparing the meat.

I shrugged. "I like her, and she doesn't have a thing for Tenchi. Besides, I think this sort of thing is new to her, so it'll probably help that if it doesn't work out between us I won't let it become messy."

"Maihty strong words 'ere, pardner," Ryoko replied in English with a southern drawl.

I snorted at her ribbing me. "I've had at least one relationship end on good terms."

"Oh? What happened?"

I shrugged. "We were going different directions. I was in the military, going from one school to another, and then to a ship stationed in Japan, and she was in college and had family issues. We simply agreed that it wasn't meant to be and moved on with our lives... I'm still pretty sure she was absolutely heart broken, though."

Ryoko chuckled. "Lady killer, eh?"

I scoffed. "As if. I hardly ever got the time to go out and date anyone. And just breaking the ice with a total stranger is the toughest part. It's always easier if there's a third party to make the introductions. But, with the few girls I did manage to get my foot in the door with... Their reactions were the same all around. I was like a storm that blew into their lives and completely turned everything upside down."

Ryoko snickered. "I can see that, too! Oh man, Ayeka was right! Minagi never stood a chance! I can't wait until I tell her."

My eyebrows levitated as I gave Ryoko a surprised look. "Gleeful admission to The Princess that she was right about something?"

“Bah,” Ryoko replied. “This is you we're talking about here. In matters concerning a certain someone else... well, that's when things get interesting.”

I rolled my eyes at that one. “Yeah, in the ancient Chinese sense of the word.”

Ryoko flashed me a grin. “And don't you forget it, buddy.”

Later on, with Sasami and Ayeka keeping Minagi happily engaged, I went and knocked on Washu's door.

“Washu-chan. Pondstrider.”

There was a click from somewhere under my feet and the floor dropped out from underneath me.

“WHAAA!?” I yelped as gravity's pull sent me down the hatch.

What happened next... well, the only comparison I can draw was back when I was in Navy Recruit Training and I had to pass a basic swim qualification – basically you had to jump into the water from a 20-foot high-dive platform and swim fifty yards using any stroke. It was like the first part with the two-story drop, only there was no water waiting for me below. However, I did suddenly slow very much like I had dropped into a swimming pool of water.

I looked around and found I was in the main atrium of Washu's Lab. Just as my feet gently touched down on the ground, gravity resumed its normal business – I was oddly reminded of riding downwards on a high-speed elevator and arriving at the ground floor – and Washu popped up out of nowhere like a kid on a sugar rush.

“OOOH! Whatsit!? Whatsit!? Whatsit!?” cried the pint-sized mad scientist as she seemed to teleport all around me. “Ninjas? Pirates? Zombies? Ninja-Pirate-Zombies!? OOOH! I'd love to dissect one of those!”

I laughed. “Whoah, slow down there, small stuff! Nothing like that, but it's still important. Yakage is gonna show up at Dinnertime and kidnap Ayeka.”

That sobered Washu up immediately. “Huh. I can see how that could pose problems. Tenchi?”

“Totally ineffective,” I stated flatly.

“Even with the changes you brought about?”

I shrugged. “Do you see him taking himself seriously enough to duke it out with Yakage from the get go the way he did with Kagato at the end?”

Washu made a pained sounding sigh. “Dammit, Garrick, you ever think I get sick of you being right like that?”

I gave Washu a small smile and said, “Wise man once say, truth hurts. Sometimes you science types forget that.”

“Oh, c'mon! It's not always that bad!”

I raised an eyebrow at Washu and said, “Washu's Pore.”

I couldn't have gotten a better reaction out of her if I had thwacked her over the head with a five-pound mallet.

“Don't feel too bad about it now, Washu-chan,” I said as I placed my hands comfortingly on her little shoulders. “Now it's prime real estate space.”

Washu snickered. “You know what? I just figured you out, mister. You are a mad genius, just like me.”

“HAH!” I crowed. “What took you so long to figure that out?”

It was Washu's turn to shrug this time. “With your tech level, you're hard to pick out among the rest of your kind. You're experiments are hardly noteworthy to people like myself... But then, I'm not like the others.” At this, Washu's expression took on a fond, motherly expression. “Watching you and your own projects... it's so much like watching a child at play.”

I couldn't help myself then. I just grabbed Washu-chan up and gave her a bone-crushing hug. "I guess that's just because I'm such a kid at heart myself," I said softly as I let her go again.

Washu smiled back at me. "I saw that the moment I laid eyes on you, Gar-kun. You used to be so sad, frightened, and lonely... but now... now you're not alone, and you're definitely not frightened anymore."

I smiled down at the strange little person that called herself Washu Hakubi. "That's because I have you and everyone else here to thank."

Washu smiled as she scoffed. "C'mon, enough with the sappy warm and fuzzy feelings. Let's go get some dinner and see if we can talk down this wayward student of mine."

Even so, an evil part of me could not help but notice that she left out the 'sad' part. I was definitely feeling better these days, but even so... there was always that taint of depression lurking in the back of my head... waiting to seize on any negative circumstances that may come my way.

Once you pare away the basis of my day-to-day activities; all the intellectual pursuits, physical betterment, and projects to make my little world a better place... once you look past all that, managing my depression was what being me was all about. Everything else was simply a means to that end.

My sun sign is in Libra, and I definitely live up to it by striving to balance my joy against my sorrow. I don't try to keep score or anything like that. I simply live with the knowledge that all it takes is the slightest thing to bring me down.

I must be careful. The higher I climb, the more painful the fall will be. I only pray that my new-found family will be there with a net when it does happen.

I was not lying to Funaho.

I will die for these people if I must. If I lose even one of them... it would kill me for sure.

Dinner that night felt like a slice of heaven on Earth.

The food was delicious.

The conversation was lively.

The company was warm.

I flirted with Minagi.

She gave me warm smiles with flush cheeks.

Ryoko teased Minagi.

Ayeka teased me.

I would fire back with glee.

Tenchi stifled his laughter, lest he became a target.

Washu cackled – she didn't care because she could troll everyone in one go.

Including Yosho.

Noboyuki and Mihoshi were our unwitting audience to this dinner theater.

Sasami positively glowed.

Just as it was all reaching a crescendo, the point where I would normally break out a small quantity of my booze, it happened.

The glass windows that looked out at the lake all shattered, as drones shot through them faster than we could see.

The joyful look on my face turned to determined wrath.

For ruining this... perfect night... I was going to get my pound of flesh.

Forewarned is forearmed. I wasn't sure if the Manga Timeline would take effect, but I prepared for it regardless.

Forewarned is forearmed. I hadn't been idle. I was a very busy little boy building big-boy toys. Those projects Washu had mentioned? Only about half of them were *not* forms of armament. I had

been making guns. Surprised? Don't be. I was a Gunners Mate in the Navy and I have a doctorate in Mechanical Engineering. That's really all you need... well, a computer workstation with CAD software and a fully equipped machine shop does wonders, too.

Forewarned is Forearmed. I had left one of my backpacks leaning innocuously against the couch. The others had seen me use it to tote various books around along with my iPad and laptop, so I took comfort in knowing that it would remain unmolested.

Forewarned is forearmed. Literally. This was starting to become a mantra for me. Everyone's eyes went wide as they saw me remove the bizarre short-barreled shotgun from the backpack and fit the utterly ridiculous looking drum-magazine to its receiver. I had based it off of the Serbu Super Shorty. And then I slipped on the safety glasses. It would suck to get splinters in my eyes.

“COVER YOUR EARS!” I snarled. Click-click went the action as I pumped the offset pistol grip, mounted at a jaunty forty-five degrees to the stubby barrel, stripping a 3” 12 gauge steel slug round from the magazine. And waited.

The drones had been precisely programmed to home in on threats. And me standing upright with a firearm in hand screamed it in neon letters. I barely saw the first one coming as I reacted.

The time spent in my simulator with Mihoshi had not been wasted I noted to myself as I was showered with splinters. What was left of the drone smashed into one of the timbers that arced over the vast open space.

Just as I thought. These slug rounds struck with more than 4000 joules of raw kinetic energy in a spot barely more than an inch in diameter.

The second one joined its brother as it followed too quickly for its relatively simple computer to process just what kind of danger it was in. It bleeped in such a pathetic manner as it died that I almost felt sorry for it.

“An impressive use of... primitive technology, young man.”

My ears were ringing, but I could still hear him.

“Sometimes all you need is a hammer to take care of a nail or two. Perhaps you've lost sight of that, Mr. Yakage.”

The man stepped into view at last, shrouded in Juraian robes and a mask. “You seem to have me at a disadvantage. Who are you?”

“He's my newest student,” chirped Washu happily as she came up behind me. “Isn't he wonderful? He just loves taking such direct routes – he doesn't beat around the bush at all! And he's such a fast learner, too!”

Yakage stopped dead in his tracks. He then slowly removed his mask, revealing his scarred face.

“You're alive! I'd heard the reports, but I hardly believed them.”

“Well, you should know by now, Yakage, I'm just full of surprises.”

“Yes... like this student of yours here. Does he know what he's getting into here?”

“Far better than you might think,” I told him flatly. “In fact, the question is, do *you* know what you're getting into here?”

Yakage's eyes widened in surprise, and then he exploded into laughter. “You? A mere Human? Presume to be a threat to me!?”

“Damn straight I do!” I snarled right back at him. “I'll tell you what I told Seto Kamiki Jurai. I am human. My life is destined to be short. Painfully so. And I can feel it, every second of every day, burning away like a candle. For that reason alone, us humans struggle to give our lives meaning. And if the meaning of my life is that I protected these wonderful people from the likes of you, then I will welcome the fire that consumes me. So go ahead! Bathe me in flames! I'll burn so brightly you'll never see the light of day again!”

To emphasize the point, I racked the action on the shotgun once more, ejecting the still-smoldering shell and sending it skittering.

“You're insane!” Yakage cried out.

There was a strange clap and an electrical sizzle. I smiled as I knew exactly what that sound meant – Tenchi was now playing seriously.

“Am I?” I asked as I felt Tenchi's presence next to me.

“No! Stop this now!” cried out Minagi as she interposed herself between us and Yakage.

“Minagi!?” cried out Yakage in shock. “What are you doing here!? You were supposed to assess this boy's potential for me!”

“Assessing!?” Minagi cried out in shock. “That's what I was supposed to do? Your programming nearly made me kill these people!”

“If that is what it takes, then there is no life precious enough to stop me from achieving my goal! You should know this, Minagi!”

“No! That's wrong! That's horrible! I don't want to be that way! I don't want to be a killer!”

“What is wrong with you, Minagi? Have you lost your mind?”

“I lost my memories, and now I don't think I want them back, ever!”

You could hear a pin drop in there.

Yakage dropped to his knees, completely stunned. “minagi...”

I then stepped over to Yakage and hunkered down by his side. “Oi, I think this is where you start playing nice, Mr. Yakage, otherwise we'll all open up an institutional size can of Masaki Family Brand Whoop-Ass.”

It wasn't over.

Not really.

Yakage was no longer making any fuss about fighting Tenchi or myself. But things were still far from settled. That much was clear as Yakage sat at the table with us, nursing a tall glass of green tea. The tension was as thick as you'd think it would be.

I was just glad that Minagi wasn't present for this. Instead, Yakage had called over her ship, the *Hinase*, and she was spending some time getting reacquainted with its computers.

I thought it was interesting that Minagi had a genuine Juraian tree ship... without a tree to occupy it. And I had a seedling without a ship.

I didn't want to get my hopes up, but I felt like fate was whacking me over the head with a clue hammer.

“So,” Yakage said at last. “You know for a fact that my best blade cannot defeat the Light Hawk Sword, and that I would die in the encounter. Washu vouches for you. As does... Minagi.” Yakage shook his head, still not quite coming to terms with how Minagi turned against him. “This is quite a quandary I find myself in.”

I scoffed. “Try being me. Not that I'm not grateful for the life I have here, but winding up in this place wasn't something I was planning on myself.”

Yakage glared at me. “What makes you think I would want to stay here?”

I shrugged. “Nothing. Except for the fact that you're dying. I know it. You know it. So does everyone else here. And you gain nothing by bringing on your death earlier than it ought to be.”

“Garrick has a point,” said Washu quietly. “I took a moment to look at your genetic make-up. You don't have a lot of time left, but it's enough to do something better than to get yourself killed.”

“And what would you have me do?” Yakage seethed. “Sit out on a sun deck and spend my final days languishing?”

“How about you take on a student?” said Washu matter of factly. “Hell, take Garrick. He's a quick study. He's good with numbers and concepts and he can pick up all the academics in six months. I guarantee it.”

I gaped at Washu. “What?”

“Six months?” Yakage said flatly. “This isn't some joke of yours, is it Washu?”

Washu grinned a feral smile. “I wouldn't joke about this. Garrick has two mental disorders that, separately, can be quite debilitating. However, with a dedicated teacher they can work in conjunction to drive him to learn at a phenomenal pace. First of all, he'll dedicate himself to learning a new concept until he has it down pat. But you can't let him linger on it too long or else he'll get bored, so you have to keep feeding him new material. He's so easily distracted by something new that if you play him right you can keep him going until he drops dead from exhaustion.”

“Washu-chan, what are you doing?” I asked, slightly horrified.

“Killing two birds with one stone. Pipe down, dangit!”

Yakage glared at me, then Washu, and then cleared his throat before going on, “I will admit that your student is... different. But I still don't see why I should teach him. What purpose would it serve?”

Washu kept grinning. “Well, I suppose you haven't heard the news yet. The Royal Household *is* keeping it under wraps, after all.”

“You don't mean to say he is a bastard child!?”

I snorted. “Were it so simple.”

“HAH!” cried out Washu gleefully. “It's better than that! Queen Funaho is going to adopt him!”

“But why him of all people!?” said Yakage incredulously.

In response, Sasami came over, settled herself into my lap just-as-you-please, and then wrapped her arms around my torso as she gave me a huge hug. Of course, I gave her a bear-hug right back, causing the tiny little princess to make a pleased grunt. Yakage could only look on in shock at the amount of familiarity I was displaying with the Second Crown Princess of Jurai.

Sasami then looked to Yakage and spoke softly. “When Gar-nii-san came here, he lost his entire family. He was hurting so badly I thought he would die of heartache. So, I talked to Mother, Aunt Funaho, and Grandmother Seto about making him part of our family so that he can have a family again. I know that he'll be good for our family, because Nii-san has a strong heart full of love. Besides, Nii-san is fun, too. He teaches me all kinds of things like how to fire a pistol.” Sasami's eyes widened as she suddenly realized she wasn't supposed to say that. “Oops!”

“WHAT!?” screeched Ayeka causing me to wince. Oh man, here it comes. “GARRICK GRIMM, EXPLAIN YOURSELF NOW.”

I turned and stared Ayeka down, though I have to admit that she looks absolutely radiant when she's angry. There's just something about those Juraian women...

“She was curious about the tactical course Mihoshi and I put together. I know for a fact that once a child becomes curious about firearms the best course of action is to satisfy their curiosity to prevent future mishaps. I've been teaching her using a .22 caliber target pistol. By comparison, it's like a needler laser, so it's pretty easy for her to handle.”

“And you felt it was fine to leave me out of the loop!?” Ayeka growled.

“That was Sasami's request. She was worried about you having exactly this kind of reaction. Relax. Washu-chan has been supervising.”

Ayeka glowered at me disdainfully, but subsided somewhat as she said, “Very well then. However, I myself wish to ascertain the content of your lessons with Sasami. Therefore, you will teach me everything you have taught our sister thus far.”

“By your command, my beloved sister.”

If Yakage had been shocked before, now he was completely floored.

With Yakage lost in thought and the ad-hoc meeting breaking up, I went outside and met up with Minagi.

“Garrick!” she called out as she flew up to me and wrapped me up in a hug.

“Whoah! Are you alright there?” I asked.

Minagi was quiet for a moment. “I think I will be,” she said softly.

I looked into Minagi's eyes and offered her a small smile. “Sounds like you have something heavy on your mind. I know just the place for that situation. C'mon, follow me.”

She gave me a confused look, but followed me regardless as I jogged down the waterfront path and made my way to Yosho's tree, Funaho.

“A Royal Tree!” cried out Minagi. “Here!?”

I nodded. “It's Prince Yosho's tree.” I then walked up to the trunk and placed my hand against it. “Hello Funaho. I brought a friend with me. Mind if we come up?”

The lights beamed down from the leaves and I heard the tree's voice. *“Yosho's little brother is always welcome in my boughs. As is his precious friend.”*

I smiled as I looked back over at Minagi's astonished face. “C'mon,” I said at barely more than a whisper, and then I grabbed the lowest branch and swung myself up into the canopy.

As I settled into my favorite spot – a broad branch that gave me a view of the stars framed by the canopy leaves – Minagi appeared above me, giving me confused look.

“This... isn't disrespectful?” she said nervously.

I smiled up at her. “Minagi, we humans are descended of an arboreal species. Our love for lofty yet sheltered spaces comes from this background. This is our ancestral home. The trees know this and welcome us like mothers welcoming their children home. So find a spot. Make yourself comfortable. Funaho here won't mind one bit.”

Minagi glanced around for a second, then shrugged and promptly layered herself on me. I gave her a look of mild surprise, to which she replied,

“Well, you did say to make myself comfortable.”

I chuckled. “You are adorable,” I said and then kissed her on top her head. Minagi just sighed contently and for a long time we just laid there like that.

In fact, we were laying there long enough that I was starting to get that sleepy feeling... and then Minagi suddenly spoke.

“Hinase won't restore my memories,” she said. “It refuses to do so.”

I sighed. “I didn't think it would. Hinase is worried for you. To be honest, I can't blame it. I didn't have the happiest childhood myself.”

“But... why? I mean... you seem okay.”

“Yeah, but I wasn't the nicest kid, either. Sure, I was an adorable little flirt that stole hearts left and right. Kinda wish my mother was still around to tell you, but the pictures I have will have to do. However, I was also an evil, self-righteous, and conceited little brat that didn't play well with others. I got better, though. But the point is, I understand why Hinase thinks its better this way.”

“But... you don't think so?” asked Minagi.

“Well... You can go about this one of two ways. One is that you can go ahead and make peace with the fact your past is a mystery to you and let it go. The other is that you confront your father and fight him to recover your memories.”

“But he'll die if I do that!” Minagi cried out suddenly as she levered herself up to give me a horrified look.

I simply shook my head and gave her a helpless look in return. “He won't care. Because believe it or not, he wants you to be happy, even at his own expense. Such is the calling all fathers that love their children feel. I will surely be the same way with my own children when I finally have them.”

Minagi's expression then became pained. “But he wanted me to kill people... people that haven't even done anything wrong. How can a man like that love me?”

I sighed. “I'm not sure what the deal with that was... All I know for certain is two things – that he loves you very much more than he allows himself to show, and that he wants you to possess the strongest sword in the universe. From that, I can suppose that he wants you to be able to take care of yourself no matter what might come your way. And in order to do that, you would have had to been willing to kill anyone that would threaten you.”

“But what he wanted me to do was still going too far!”

“Oh, I agree. Remember earlier? I pointed out to him that he might have lost sight of the fact that you don't need to go to extremes so often.”

Minagi gave me a dirty look. “And that gun of yours wasn't?”

I smiled at that. “That, milady, was a mechanical engineer bringing hard physics to the table in the most efficient manner possible. Those drones of his are no joke, so I simply decided not to mess around. Like Washu-chan said, I prefer to be direct and not beat around the bush.”

Minagi sighed as she settled herself back down on my chest. “Okay, I can see your point. And I admit, it was pretty impressive, too. I never knew Earth had such potent weapons despite the primitive technology.”

“Conservative, my dear. Earth firearms are an exercise in conservative technology.”

“I don't care. Just promise me that you will take care of yourself, Garrick. I'd feel horrible if anything happened to you.”

“I promise,” I said as I stroked her head gently and gave her another kiss. “In fact, I'll speak with Washu-chan on the matter tomorrow. I actually have a few ideas. You might even like them.”

Minagi made a contented sounding noise and snuggled up against me. We were like that long enough for me to start dozing again when Minagi suddenly asked,

“May I sleep with you again tonight?”

I chuckled softly. “People will definitely think that we're doing something,” I warned her gently.

“What makes you think I want to disabuse them of the notion?” she asked. Suddenly her lips were on mine and I kissed back.

After a moment, she pulled back slowly and I smiled at her. “Not that I mind, Minagi, but isn't this a little fast for you?”

Minagi smiled back and shook her head. “I don't know why I feel this way, Garrick, but I do. And somehow... I feel that, despite me losing my memories, this sensation is new to me... and it's wonderful... and I am happy that you're giving it to me.”

“Alright then, but let's just be clear about something.”

“What?”

“I'm fine with this relationship becoming physically intimate... but if the time comes that we need to go our separate ways, then let's just accept it as a cruddy turn of fate and let it go at that.”

“So we just live for the moment then?” she asked, giving me the bedroom eyes. “I think I can live with that.” And with that she put her lips to mine once more.

The opening bars of Sakura Saku began to blast cheerfully from my alarm clock. With the unerring accuracy of a man who will not permit his sleep to be interrupted any further, my hand found the alarm switch (not the snooze button) and turned off the alarm.

Muscle memory is an amazing thing.

“Errrrmph,” said a voice succinctly in my ear. “shoulda done that 'rlier.”

“sorry,” I replied back softly. “kinda distracted me last night.”

A soft bark of a laugh. “who distracted who!? you never really explained where you learned that trick with your fingers.”

I cracked my eyes open and found Minagi giving me a small, sensuous smile. Ah, the afterglow! How I have missed this.

When you get two people in the sack that are very athletic like Minagi and I, and one of them *really* knows what they're doing... well, let's just say that was an experience like none other. I was intent on staying in bed for a while longer and it was obvious that Minagi felt the same.

“When I was much younger, I had a chance encounter with a book,” I explained. “It looked pretty plain at first. But once you start reading it, you realize it's anything but plain. The book was about the findings from a questionnaire inquiring about all the details of the sex lives of about a thousand woman. I learned more about female sexuality from that one book than all the other guides I've ever read.”

“Just books?” Minagi asked playfully. “What you did last night was more than that.”

I smiled back at her. “That and a little bit of practical experience.”

“Just a little?” she continued to tease.

“I'm just that good with my fingers.”

“Among other things.”

“I'll have you know that the equipment downstairs is perfectly average. I know because I've seen some guys that are absolute monsters in that department.”

Recruit Training – mentally scarring young men everywhere since the dawn of time.

“You know better than that, silly,” Minagi replied as she inched closer to me, every line on her face screaming indulgent sensuality. “It's not the size of the tool. It's the skill of the user.”

We closed our eyes as our lips met. The kiss wasn't long lived, though, as there came the sound of someone knocking on my door. Very firmly at that, too. Minagi broke off the kiss suddenly as the peephole holo-screen appeared over our heads.

It was Yakage, and he didn't look very pleased.

“He can't see us, can he!?” Minagi squeaked out as she gathered the comforter around us.

“No, he can't. It's one-way only. But I don't appreciate the attitude regardless,” I grumbled as I slung myself out my bed and down the ladder.

“What are you doing!?” Minagi cried out as she saw me whip open the curtain and head straight for my door, not even stopping to put anything on.

“Giving him another piece of my mind, since it seems the first one didn't take.”

I whipped the door open right as Yakage was about to pound on it again. He reared back then at the sight of me, not a single thread of cloth to cover my body.

“Problem?” I asked him archly.

“What is the- GHHKKHHH!” he said as his eyes suddenly snapped to the direction of my sleeping area. I looked back over as well and saw Minagi trying to hide in my comforter. I stifled a laugh as I looked back at Yakage, who looked like he was about to go thermonuclear.

Honestly, I didn't care what he thought. If he tried anything he was going to find out firsthand just how tough my door really is, and then he'll find out about how I would like to handle people that try to get in without my approval.

After a few long seconds of seething incoherently, Yakage finally seemed to get control of himself and took several long breaths.

“You,” he finally ground out between clenched teeth. “And me. Out front. In thirty minutes.”

“Do you think I'm ready for this?” I asked Yosho as he fussed with the armor I had been fitted with. While Juraian battle armor pretty much took care of all the complex and fiddly details of fitting itself to you all on its own, it was best to have an experienced veteran check it over regardless.

“As an instructor, no,” said the seemingly old man. “But I think you should be fine. Especially if you put that delightfully odd way of thinking of yours to work.”

I grinned back at Yosho. “I'll see what I can manage. Dear Sister, are you almost done?”

“Just about, Dear Brother,” Ayeka replied as she wrapped my hair in a binding. It had been growing like a weed over the winter. The colder it gets, the faster my hair grows, and in the mountain highlands I had grown a whopping four inches to an already impressive queue, bringing my hair to a proper waist-length.

Poor Ayeka was torn up over it. “This hair of yours is amazing. It's thick and heavy like ours, but it's so soft and silky – not stiff at all! Is there any chance that Lord Tenchi's hair will be like this if he were to grow it out as well?”

“I'm sorry, Sister,” I said with honest regret. “Japanese hair tends to be a little more like yours. Mine is from my Native American heritage.”

Ayeka sighed. “Pity. Maybe we can convince him to undertake a gene mod... to signify his acceptance of you as his brother, I mean!”

I smiled. “So it would have nothing to do with fantasies about running your hands through thick, silky hair that happens to be growing off of Tenchi's head?”

Ayeka gave my queue a sharp tug.

“OW!” I cried out, laughing. “Okay, okay, I deserved that, I'll savor it.”

“Gar-nii-san!” called out Sasami. “I have a present for you!”

I looked down and saw that Sasami was offering me a small wooden blade.

“A shoto!” I said in wide-eyed surprise as I took the proffered weapon – a wooden wakizashi – from Sasami.

“Unh!” she replied enthusiastically. “Washu-chan said that Yakage prefers to use a double-bladed sword, so I found a fragment of Ryu-Oh and carved it up for you!”

“*You* carved this?” Sasami nodded happily and I laughed softly. “And here I didn't get anything for you!”

“Just make sure you don't get hurt. That will be your present to me.”

“How does he get off so easily?” Ayeka whispered to Sasami, for it was a well known fact that Sasami, despite her adorable looks, was an absolute mercenary when she wanted to get something out of you.

“Because he's my precious Gar-nii-san.” And that was all Sasami needed to say on the matter. I swear you'd almost think I was replacing Tenchi's place in her heart.

“Whoah! Look at you!” came Ryoko's voice. “Damn, Garrick! You shine up prettier than a brand new coin. Minagi better not see you like that or else she'll ruin all that hard work we've done.”

“Too late,” said Washu, pointing at the second-floor railing. There, Minagi stood with a wide-eyed slack-jawed expression.

And she was drooling.

“Uh-oh,” I said succinctly.

There were a pair of loud pops in rapid succession and suddenly Ryoko was holding Minagi bare inches from me.

“Oh, c'mon Ryoko!” raved Minagi as she and Ryoko struggled against each other – Minagi desperately pawing for me while trying to push Ryoko off of her, and Ryoko making all kinds of

hilarious expressions as she did her damndest to keep Minagi in check. “Just five minutes! I won't mess him up too badly! You can even watch!”

“WHOAH!” I cried out at that last little bit.

Ryoko's eyes bulged, everyone else face-vaulted and, I swear in the name of all that's holy, Sasami-chan had a freaking *nose bleed*. She just covered it up so effectively that I was the only one that saw it. Noboyuki, I decided then and there, should really keep better tabs on his doujinshi collection.

“Whoooooa there, Missy!” Ryoko replied once she regathered her wits. “I can admire your spirit, but Garrick's gotta fight for your honor now.”

Minagi sighed heavily as she slumped against Ryoko. “ohhh alright,” she said weakly as she picked herself back up. Suddenly, she went ramrod-straight as she then announced, “BUT AFTER YAKAGI IS DONE WITH HIM GARRICK IS ALL MINE! DO YOU HEAR ME?”

“That's nice, dear,” I said as I leaned over and pecked her on the cheek, causing her to blush. I laughed – I couldn't help myself. Seriously, *now* you blush? After that outburst about letting others watch!? I was starting to like Minagi more and more – not that I'm an exhibitionist, but she was definitely my kind of crazy. You know, the sort where you let yourself get carried just a little too far away. Freddy Mercury was well known amongst his friends for this.

I then turned and looked at everyone. They all stood there, smiling back at me.

My family.

Sasami, my loving, kind, mercenary little sister.

Ayeka, my bold yet refined sister – courageous in ways that few women are.

Ryoko, my close friend who had more love in her heart than she knew what to do with.

Washu, my kindred spirit – out of them all, she knew my heartbreak the best.

Mihoshi. Sweet, bumbling, loving Mihoshi. She will always turn up at exactly the right moment.

Yosho, my teacher. He held my respect and gratitude for propping me up when I needed it.

And Tenchi... The young man that looked up to me, if for no other reason than that I never really gave up. His only fault in this convoluted situation was being afraid of change.

Aren't we all in some way or another?

And then there was, of course, Minagi. Ryoko's sister. Bold like she is, but without the bravado and tempered with a generous helping of sweetness like Sasami's. Like everyone else here, she was courageous and would never shrink back from a threat to her loved ones.

I wondered oddly if she was the one. What would it be like to have her as my life companion – to raise a family with her as my partner?

I had to set that aside for now, though. As sorely as I craved having children of my own and a wife to help me raise them, it would still have to wait.

There were more immediate things to tend to.

“Thank you. All of you,” I said as I lowered my head to them. “You've all given me back the things I thought I'd lost... for that, I'll love you all forever.” I then turned to face the patio, tucking the shoto Sasami gave me into my belt next to the bokuto Yosho gave me. “Okay, let's see if I got this Big Damn Hero thing down pat.”

“Well, you showed up,” said Yakage dryly. “At least you're not a coward. Aren't you a bit overdressed, though?”

“I'm no fool, Yakage,” I said levelly. “I don't walk into a fight like this unprepared.”

“Good,” Yakage replied with a grim smile. “You have some sense in that head of yours. So now the question is how much more sense do I need to beat into you, child?”

I raised an eyebrow. “This isn't about Minagi then?”

Yakage glared at me. “Oh, don't worry about that. I intend to get my pound of flesh where that is concerned. Though I must admit, Minagi has never shown any romantic interest in anyone until she met you. And I have to wonder now... how much is it really her lack of memory... and how much of it is your devilish charm?”

“Hah,” I scoffed, much to Yakage's displeasure. “Nice verbal judo there. In one way I'm taking advantage of her and in another you paint me as man-whore. I suppose it's just as well – Ayeka can tell her parents that you legitimately besmirched my honor as a man, thus the need for this duel.”

Yakage laughed slowly. “Young fool. This is no duel. This... is a crucible. And I will use it to divine what you are really made of, child.”

“Then I hope you brought enough fuel for the fire, because it's gonna take a lot more than you think to melt me down.”

“Enough talk then! Draw your weapon, Garrick Grimm!”

I drew the shoto with my left hand and the bokuto in my right, turning to my dominant side so as to present the bokuto to face Yakage. The shoto I held in a low-guard position – with luck it would block the other end of Yakage's double-blade and allow me a chance to counterattack.

“So, I see you brought two blades,” said Yakage with a smirk. “Someone has been whispering in your ear. At least this means I don't have to hold back!” With that, he brought out both of his massive blade emitters, joined their handles, and ignited them.

Crap. To think he would have gone with just one, at least for a little bit, if I had left the shoto in my belt. Ah well. I planned on this from the get-go anyhow.

And then came the moment I liked the least – the stand off.

That moment of tension between when we take our stances and when we charge at each other. Where you wait until the feeling is just perfect. I don't really mind the fact that we have to wait for this moment, but the waiting itself just kills me.

“I wonder what would have happened if, instead of Tenchi, Garrick was the one to fight Seiryu,” I heard Ayeka's voice somewhere behind me ask.

“Are you kidding?” I heard Ryoko reply. “Garrick would have killed the man.”

“Shush you two,” hissed Washu. “This is important!”

Yakage gave me a look of consternation from across the deck. I could only shrug in return – it was a bit awkward with the two blades in hand, but I'm pretty sure I managed to convey my feelings on the matter.

The silence settled in once more and we waited.

And then... NOW!

There were no sudden shouts, no challenges, just sudden movement as we both charged at each other like two freight trains on a single siding hell bent for leather. I kept my eyes on Yakage's movements. I wanted to know which way his blade would go. I was pretty sure that I would avoid it with what I had in mind, but it still helped to know.

Finally, when we were at what I judged to be just the right distance between us, I shifted my weight backwards and planted my feet. And then I fell to my side and began a foot-first base-runner's slide.

For Yakage, it simply did not compute. After all, in all his centuries of experience, who would throw themselves to the ground and make themselves so vulnerable to attack?

His blade came for me, carving a smoking furrow in the wooden deck but I parried the blow with the shoto... and counter-attacked with the bokuto, aiming for his legs. Yakage tried to adjust his footing, but I still managed to catch his left ankle with the full force of the blow.

Yakage snarled as he stumbled. I rolled and picked myself back up again, assuming a defensive posture.

But a second attack was not forthcoming. Instead, Yakage looked at me in unmitigated shock. “What in the Great Tree’s name are you thinking?”

I smiled back at him. “That’s the question, isn’t it?” I answered. “What is Garrick Grimm thinking? How about something along the lines of ‘I better pull out all the stops if he thinks he’s gonna test me. Besides, better him than me!’” Yakage stared at me in disbelief for a moment longer, and then burst out laughing uproariously.

“Now I get it!” he crowed. “I see now why The Professor likes you so much, boy! Like her, you don’t follow the rules, at least when it suits you not to. Oh, you’ll follow them often enough, just to keep up appearances. But the moment you see you’re not going to benefit from them...” Yakage then leveled an evil smile at me. “You set the rule book on fire and throw it out the window.”

Yakage laughed again, this time the tone taking on a slightly maddened pitch. “Oh, how I wish I could have gotten you sooner! I would have given you the GP Body Modification to extend your life and taught you everything I could. I would have made you into a monster that rivaled Kagato. You might have even surpassed him with your vicious practicality and killed him before Tenchi even mattered to anyone.”

No joke there. While I may not be the type to kill a fly with a sledgehammer (as amusing as it might be to try), I am the type where, if I honestly wanted to make sure a certain man dies, I would use bullets filled with polonium.

The only reason why I think I never pulled any knives on anyone like my younger brothers did as children was because of my Grandfather. The old man had put the fear of himself into me, and no surprise, either, considering he was an old World War II veteran from the Pacific Theater. That stoutly built little Cajun man was a terror to behold at times.

Small wonder I have anger issues – his blood runs in my veins.

“I think I’d like to keep as much of my humanity as possible, thank you very much,” I replied levelly to Yakage.

“And how long do you think that will last, boy?” Yakage growled back at me. “How long until something happens and there’s no way to bring you back? And even if you do manage to beat the odds, how long until you die of old age? Minagi will still have her youth long after you’ve turned to dust. What do you think that will do to my daughter’s heart?”

“We’ll work it out one way or another. It’s too early to tell anyhow.”

“What? You mean this is just some sort of dalliance?”

“Pretty much. We’re two consenting adults that find each other attractive. The rest isn’t fit for public dissemination.”

“You... YOU ANIMAL!”

Whoah! Plan B! RUN!

“Come back here and fight me like a man, coward!”

“Shut up! I’m taking this where I can fight on my own terms!” And boy, was I ever.

Thing is, ever since Washu-chan had reinforced my body I had taken my free-running to a whole new level. I was doing things to myself that would have destroyed an ordinary man’s body.

Basically, I had been free running through the trees, making the canopies into my own personal little kingdom. For certain, there was a lot of trial and error. I’ve had a lot of falls that would have killed me before. Now I just get up, dust myself off, walk it off, and go again until I get it right.

I had only been half-joking when I told Yoshō that I would take our practice into the tree tops.

Quickly I sheathed my wooden swords, shimmied up the first tree I got to and perched myself on a sturdy limb to look down at Yakage’s gobsmacked expression.

“Well, you coming or not?” I called down tauntingly. Yakage snarled wordlessly and I saw him coil in on himself for a tremendous bound. I didn't wait – I gave off a whoop as I jumped for the next branch.

Up, over, under, twisting, swinging, flipping, loping, skipping, bouncing, ricocheting. I had gone hyper-active and was gleefully leading Yakage on a chase through the branches, all while Yakage cursed me, my parentage, my seed, and anything else he could think of while slashing at me with his double-sword, always missing me by inches as I kept bouncing and swinging from one limb to another.

Despite how all this seemed random, it was actually a calculated move on my part. Yakage, I knew, was dying. He really didn't have his old strength anymore... or at least if he was able to summon it, then it wasn't for extended periods of time. Me, on the other hand, a youthful thirty-something with boundless energy and a body toughened up by Washu-chan...

That, and I had gotten him pissed.

Suddenly, Yakage broke into a coughing fit. Blood spattered the trunk as he leaned to it for support.

“You clever bastard,” Yakage swore softly. “I can't believe I let you get to me like this. You really are a devious little child, aren't you? You knew you couldn't fight me directly... so you changed the game.”

I swung my way over to his limb and sighed as I straightened up. “I do what I must to get by,” I replied in an equally hushed tone. “If that means I play up a man's weakness against him to keep him from beating the shit out of me, then that's exactly what I'll do... unless he expects that, then I gotta change up my game.”

Yakage laughed ruefully as he wiped his bloody hand against the trunk.

“You're very wise for your age, child. I always wondered what Emperor Azusa saw in that woman when he made her his wife. Now I think I'm starting to understand. After all... this is the first time I have ever gone up against an Earth Man.

“The GP are right to make this a protected territory. Your kind are highly competitive... and even worse, you tend to incite conflict. If your people ever got off this planet in mass, the entire galaxy would be set ablaze.”

I bowed to Yakage for the rather backhanded compliment. “Thank you. So, what now?”

Yakage stared at me for a brief moment. “Yosho has spoken highly of your capability. Thus far you've managed to outpace Tenchi in learning the way of the sword.”

“Ooo, I think I see where this is going,” I said nervously. Apparently this wasn't over yet.

Yakage laughed. “You're right to be cautious, but this isn't what you think. I merely wish to see your skill with a sword.”

“Right here?” I asked.

“No better place,” said Yakage with a smile. “You are stuck on this branch with me... nowhere to go at all.”

“Shit,” I cursed. He was right. This was one of the few branches around here that, while I could get to it, getting off of it presented an issue – the only way off being a twenty-foot drop.

Yakage reignited his blade, this time only one half. I drew out my bokuto and settled into a ready stance once more.

Our eyes locked, we charged, and then struck.

There was a moment of blinding pain followed by sudden weightlessness, and everything went dark.

“He's far better than I imagined,” I heard a voice somewhere speaking softly. “Had he a better weapon he might have taken me.”

“You should see some of his projects,” a more familiar voice murmured. “The weapon he used to take out your drones? He made that himself... though he claims that it's derivative work.”

“What isn't these days? We all stand on someone's shoulders no matter what field we pursue.”

“Oh, look! He's coming around. Morning there, Garrick! How ya feeling?”

“shu-chan?” I murmured as I cracked an eye open cautiously. Fortunately, she seemed to have the lights dimmed, but that did nothing for the fire burning in my chest. “Gahdahm ch'st f'lls 'ikes't used fer trampoline,” I said through clenched teeth. “F'king 'aser swords.”

“I told you I'd get my pound of flesh from you, boy,” came Yakage's voice.

“Din't haf ta be so f'king litteral!” I cried out in pain.

“I better do something about that,” said Washu as she twiddled something on a holo-pad. Right away, blessed relief flooded my system.

“ooooohhhhhohohohoh, that's nice. Soooo much betteerrrr... Out of curiosity – pharmaceutical or pain editor?”

“Bit of both,” Washu replied. “Pain editor blocks it out completely, but the drug helps with the pain induced stress.”

“Natch,” I quipped. I then looked to Yakage. “So, satisfied now?”

“For now,” Yakage allowed. “You had better do well as a student, though, or else I may feel that a... repeat lesson will be in order.”

“Good! Good!” said Washu cheerfully. “Now that that's out of the way, we have visitors. You can come in now!”

I was expecting Minagi, one of the girls, Tenchi, or even Yosho to show up. I was, however, not expecting Seto to step into view.

“Oh my, you seem to have gotten roughed up, Garrick,” said the Devil Princess of Jurai with a smile that said 'Boys will be boys'.

“I had the other guy on the ropes,” I said glibly, “but then he played the 'fight fairly' card and beat me with experience. By the way, not that I am unhappy to see you, but why are you here all the sudden?”

“We were following unconfirmed reports of an outlaw in this vicinity when we heard from the Princesses that Yakage was here. Imagine that,” said Seto coyly as she leveled a deadly glare at the man in question. “I'll be blunt with you, Yakage.” The man grimaced and reared backwards as Seto began to advance on him. “I'm of half-a-mind to arrest you and bring you back home to face punishment for your crimes – chief amongst them bringing harm to a ward of the Royal Family.”

“It's official?” I cried out. “Already?”

“Not the adoption,” Seto said, turning a kind smile to me. “For now, though, the council has agreed to grant you provisional membership of the Royal Household until Funaho and I can get them to agree to let us adopt you in properly. I love my son-in-law, but he can be quite stubborn at times.”

I nodded at that and Seto turned her attention back to Yakage. “As I was saying, part of me would love to bring you back for judgment. However, since you have been so kind as to agree to pass your knowledge down to Garrick, I will let it pass. It has been a while since the Royal Family has had its own Master Weaponsmith.”

“That's what you want me to do?” I asked incredulously.

“If you don't mind,” said Seto as she turned to me with a smile once more. “I just got done playing with this marvelous little toy of yours.” She then held up the shot gun I'd used to kill Yakage's drones. “Got to admit, this thing kicks like a doudo... but it strikes like one, too – it actually manages to overload most mass-produced personal shields in one shot. With some refinement this could be just the thing my anti-pirate forces need for their boarding actions. I can only imagine what will come of it after Yakage is done educating you.”

I blinked at Seto. "Is this some kind of test?" I asked.

"Oh? Why would you feel that way, Garrick?" asked Seto kindly.

I sighed as I tried to put what was on my mind into words. "I understand you don't like pirates... but deciding my career so suddenly... that's not entirely like you. And especially not something you know I may come to dislike. The weapons I make are mostly for my own use. If a friend or family member expresses an interest, then I may gift someone with one of my creations, but that is about as far as I would go. I'm not doing this to arm the military.

"I want to build things that make everyone's lives better. Weapons... do not necessarily do this."

Seto chuckled, a deep and throaty laugh. "Well spoken, Garrick. I'm glad that you feel that way. Otherwise, I think I would have had to keep a much closer eye on you than I really wanted. That said though... If you want the job, it's yours once Yakage is done with you. Don't worry, it really is nothing more than a ceremonial position. You see, those that the Master Weaponsmith judges to be worthy to hold his creations is held in high esteem by the Royal Household."

I blinked in surprise. "You mean I would, in essence, be judging the character of the people the Royal Household interacts with?"

Seto nodded. "Indeed. While it's not really necessary... it is something we feel better with than without."

"But why would you want me for that? I mean, you hardly know me!"

"I may not," Seto replied, putting a fingertip to my lips to shush me. "Although I have been watching you from afar when I can. I also speak with my grandchildren on a regular basis. They have truly come to regard and adore you as the older brother we want you to be. Think about it, my grandson. Little Sasami is absolutely smitten with you and wants nothing more than to see you smile. My darling Ayeka grows more steadfast and serene every time I see her. Yosho cannot stop about how hard you push yourself in training... nor can he be more impressed with how Tenchi has begun to follow your example.

"In case I'm not being clear, I'll spell it out for you. All ulterior motives aside, I want you to be part of our family, Garrick, and the only thing really holding us back are the politics. And for once I can honestly do without them. I just want to see you and the rest of my grandchildren happy."

Warmth filled my chest and I was pretty sure it had nothing to do with Washu's medicine or Yakage's sword.

"In that case, do you mind if I call you Grandmother?" I asked Seto with a smile, already knowing what the answer would be.

Seto smiled back at me. "Only if you let me spoil you from time to time and call you Grandson."

The smile became a grin. "I think I can live with that, Grandmother."

Seto then turned to Yakage and the smile left her face. "There are things you and I need to discuss, Yakage. Let's leave Garrick be so the rest of his family can visit with him."

Yakage gave a short bow to Seto. "As the Devil Princess of Jurai wishes. Garrick, you and I will speak later."

Just as Yakage was leaving, though, Minagi was making her way in. I saw the two make eye contact and then Minagi gasped.

"That scar!" she cried out. Of course, this would be the first time she's been close enough to see the scar on his face in detail. "I... I gave you that scar! I... I remember now... the first time I ever beat you... you kept it as a memento."

"You should know then," said Yakage with uncharacteristic gentleness, "that everything I have ever done was for your sake, Minagi."

Minagi turned away, but didn't move any further. She remained in silence.

"I won't kill," she said at last. "I know I may be left without any choice in the future, but if I do have that choice... Never again!"

Yakage sighed as he lowered his head in defeat. "Very well then. I understand."

He was about to leave once more when Minagi spoke again, "Garrick is right, isn't he? You cannot possibly create an artificial Lighthawk Sword, can you?"

"...I cannot," Yakage replied with soft finality. "I have gone over the data with The Professor and the results are conclusive. I may very well have died dueling Tenchi. And I no longer have the time left to find the answers I need."

Minagi's face suddenly took on a sorrowful appearance. "I'm sorry."

Yakage was taken aback by the sudden apology. "You are? But why would you be?"

"Because it was your lifelong dream... to create the ultimate sword."

"Minagi, my life-long dream was to *give you* the ultimate sword."

Minagi then turned back to Yakage in surprise, her eyes brimming with tears. "It was!?"

"Are you so shocked?" Yakage asked kindly as he reached out and gently brushed her tears away. "A father will do anything for his daughter." Minagi gazed up at him for a moment longer and then suddenly grabbed Yakage up in an embrace, sobbing softly against his chest.

As Yakage put his arms around Minagi comfortingly, I felt a hand on my shoulder. Looking up I saw Seto giving me a warm smile. She nodded once, as though saying that she approved of what I had done here today, and then quietly left us.

For a long time, Minagi wept quietly while Yakage held her. But finally, she pulled herself together enough to ask a question.

"What now, my Master?"

"I will pass on everything to Garrick. My knowledge, my experience, my hopes and dreams... and even you. But my body is not what it once was. I will need you to help Yosho instruct Garrick in the way of the sword by sparring with him."

Minagi looked a question at me and I smiled back at her. "Don't worry. I'm tough as hell. In fact, I'll probably be up and about later today."

"Like hell you will!" snapped Washu. "You know why your chest is on fire? It's because you had a myocardial rupture!"

Holy shit.

"Myocardial?" said Minagi, putting two and two together. "You mean..."

"Yes," said Washu grimly. "His heart exploded when Yakage's sword passed through his chest."

Minagi shot a wrathful look at Yakage.

The man simply cleared his throat and said, "Perhaps I had the voltage level set too high. I am not accustomed to dueling against humans."

"MASTER!" snapped Minagi.

"Why the hell am I still alive?" I asked in horror.

Washu nodded knowingly. "Indeed, normally that sort of shock is instantly fatal for a human. However, when I reinforced your body I suspected that something like this may happen. So, to that end I made an adjustment to your neurochemistry that makes you resistant against suddenly fatal levels of shock. Even if someone were to blow a hole the size of Yakage's fist in your chest, you'd live at least long enough for me to get you into my Emergency Intensive Care and Trauma Unit."

"Gyaahhh," I grumbled. "I don't know whether to thank you or curse you. Whatever! What's the prognosis?"

Washu folded her arms and sighed as she closed her eyes.

“Your heart was not salvageable. The electrical current completely destroyed the bioelectrical system. Even if I could repair the nerve damage, which is tricky business as you already know, I would have to reprogram the nerves that control it. It's a lot more work than you think and it's easier just to make you a new heart.

“For the moment, I have an artificial heart composed of complex forcefields taking its place. It will keep you alive for now, but only so long as you stay in that bed. I have already begun to grow you a new heart and I've made a few minor improvements. Nothing major, just a bit bigger and stronger to help you cope with what's coming later. I already know you don't like the idea of me tampering with your physical makeup without your consent, but this is still within the scope of your genetic profile. Also, because we're starting from scratch, the carbon nanoweave reinforcement will be stronger. You shouldn't ever have another rupture once we get it in you.

“All said and done, you should be out of here in a week.”

“I guess there's no way to make it shorter.”

“Only if things go horribly wrong. Then you'll be out of here in a matter of hours. On a slab.”

I winced. “Okay, who are you and what did you do with happy-fun Washu-chan?”

“She's out while I'm dealing with idiots that get their hearts disintegrated. Seriously, you're making work for me. **KNOCK IT OFF!**”

Yakage began to edge away. “I think it would be best if I-”

“**AND YOU!**” Washu cried out, leveling a finger at Yakage. “Egotistical! Self-righteous! Proudful! You... **YOU'RE AN ASSHOLE!**”

I suddenly felt the irresistible urge to troll Washu. “Now now, Washu-chan, don't hold back! Tell us how you reeeaaally feeel.” Washu whipped around to me and I was briefly reminded of an Oni mask.

“**SHUTUP GARRICK!**”

Worth it, and I would be happy with that. No need to push *my* luck on that matter!

Washu then turned back to Yakage. “Look, it's not like Garrick hasn't been seriously injured before. That's why I reinforced his body in the first place! But this is the first time that it was because someone actually intended him harm! If this happens again under your watch... I will come after you and **KILL YOU** myself! Do we have an understanding, Yakage?”

“It shouldn't be a problem, Professor,” Yakage replied tiredly.

“Good. Now g'wan, get! The others want to see Garrick and he needs rest!” Without any further ado, Yakage bowed and left us.

Washu nodded her head, satisfied. “Good.” She then turned to us and flashed a mildly mischievous grin. “Okay you two. No funny business! That forcefield heart is a *very* temporary thing – it won't handle sudden movements very well... or even heavy workloads. And Minagi?”

“Yes?”

“When was the last time you had a gynecological examination?”

And down she went with a spectacular thud.

I gave Washu a flat look. “Washu, can't you be a little more gentle with these topics?”

Washu waved it off with a sigh. “You two are sexually active. This means that, even if you don't have multiple sex partners, regular examinations are important. Especially if Minagi wants to preserve her reproductive health.”

Washu got a pleading look from me. “Seriously, Washu-chan... please be gentle with her. This isn't like when you mess around with Tenchi trying to get a semen sample from him or goading Ryoko about her womanly attributes.”

“That's a low blow and you know it, buster!” said Washu sharply. “Why if you weren't so horribly ill right now I'd smack you upside the head!”

“Alright, alright!” I said, holding my hands up in surrender. “I went too far with that, I apologize! Mr. Nasty is back in his cage now.”

“Mr. Nasty?” said Washu, raising an eyebrow.

“The reason I would make a lousy diplomat – every now and then I slip up and say something tactless.”

“Well, you should know better regardless.” Washu then knelt down to help Minagi back to her feet. “Ryoko I had the advantage of creating her, so I was able to write in programming that took care of that business for her.” She then looked the still-dazed Minagi in her eyes. “But you my dear... I still need to make a full assessment so I fully understand what your medical needs may be. After all, I want my long-lost daughter to be happy and healthy, whether or not you decide to have children.”

“Children would be nice,” said Minagi with a dreamy lilt to her voice – she was sporting a rather large goose egg “Garrick and I can make *beautiful* babies.”

Washu gave me a sheepish look. “Okay, I take it back a little – you seem to be right about her being sensitive.” She then sighed. “Even if she *is* more stable than Ryoko.”

I snorted. “Can't have it all, Doc. Like the popular saying on the Internet about finding a girlfriend goes: attractive, single, mentally stable – pick only two.”

Washu grimaced at that. “Was it really that bad?”

“Pretty much. I'm trying very hard not to frighten her off and keep a realistic perspective on this thing.”

Washu blinked at me. “You really have fallen for her?”

I sighed. “I don't know yet. Right now, she's like an oasis after being lost in the desert for a long, long time.”

“I see,” sighed Washu. “Okay then, I'll go get her situated and then let the others know you're free to visit.”

“Thanks Washu-chan.”

“Don't thank me yet. You still need to deal with Sasami-chan.”

I blinked at that. “Hoo boy.”

During my week of recovery, Yakage taught me the basics. He was pleased that I already knew what he thought of as the elementary essentials – metallurgy, chemistry, physics, and how the three played together. Once he assessed my knowledge there, we quickly moved onto a crash course in high-energy physics and exotic particles. I threw myself into it and Yakage was quietly pleased.

After Washu implanted the new heart and gave me a bit of physical rehabilitation, though the first thing Yakage had me do was to build a proper smithy in my C-Space.

The thing about forging blades is that while it is very dangerous, strenuous, and painstaking work... it produces an end product that has been heat-treated to a magnificent degree. Granted, you can take a piece of metal that has already been forged and shave it all away until you have a sword... but there are other things to consider, like the grain of the metal. (This is why in automobile engines forged cranks are far superior to machined ones.)

I could write an article here and now about what I learned... but that's not what I'm doing, and that's not why you're reading this.

Simply put, Yakage started teaching me to make swords. And I took to it like a fish to water. I weathered the heat of the forge as I learned to work metal while it was hot. I learned, up close and personally, how different metals behaved when they were heated, molded, beaten, cooled and reheated over and over again.

Minagi and Sasami would watch in their spare time after bringing us lunches, fascinated by the entire process. At times, the others would come to witness this new art form that had come to our home.

The process had a hypnotic quality to it not unlike a runner's high. There would be times when I would get lost in it, seeing nothing but the steel I was working, heating and folding again and again and again. Hours would pass like this and I would feel no real sign of fatigue or hunger until I finally stepped back to admire my work. And then it would hit me and I would all but pass out.

Yakage was a bit shocked himself, but in the end he found it to be utterly satisfactory. At these times, he would give me a day to recover my energy, but he would also spend it filling my mind with the knowledge of energy blades – the types, classifications, how they worked, what they did, and how to create them.

Most fascinating of all was the Lighthawk Sword – a piece of matter transmuted by a Lighthawk Wing – broken down into the meanest components of matter and energy, and reformed into a blade that stood with no rival. It would cut anything and defeat any defense, save for another construct made with a Lighthawk Wing.

And Yakage pushed me as hard as he could. All my other training was forsaken as he worked furiously to cram as much knowledge down my throat as he could. My days would end with me tired and sore, so Minagi would carefully help me bathe, viciously attack the developing knots in my muscles, and then contently curl up with me in my bed. If that isn't love, then I don't know what is.

I knew this wouldn't last... but I still wish it had lasted longer than it did.

It happened two months after Yakage had taken me on as his student.

The day after I had finally forged a blade he deemed acceptable as a serviceable weapon. It was as though, like Charles Schultz after he penned his final Peanuts comic, Yakage had decided that he'd done what he could, and passed away peacefully in his sleep.

From what I could remember, he seemed happier than even Minagi could remember. He was at peace and even laughed with everyone else at the dinner table, enjoying the fine food Sasami had made that night. We were having Tonkatsu with homemade ginger sauce to celebrate my achievement that night. Yakage was honestly pleased with me. And then we had a few drinks and went to bed, our heads gently buzzing like our lightened hearts.

And in the morning, Yakage did not wake up again. He simply laid there in state, a small, satisfied smile on his face. In one timeline, he died violently, but satisfied. Here, thanks to me, he died peacefully, yet still satisfied.

I don't think I could ever eat Tonkatsu again, not without remembering that bittersweet memory. Of course, this meant one other thing...

The lake was so still that evening that it looked like polished glass. *Hinase* was a pristine carving that sat on the surface, making not a single ripple. A mortician that Yosho knew prepared the body for its departure in the Japanese fashion. Yakage had his final bath and shave, was carefully dressed, and finally encoffined. Yosho gave the final rights.

Minagi quietly wept the whole time. The only words that I could get from her were,

“I have to take him back... I have to bring him to the place he was happiest at. It's the only place he can truly rest.”

And so, once everything had been said and done, and the coffin was aboard *Hinase*, Minagi and I were left alone to say our goodbyes out on the boardwalk.

“So... this is it, then,” I said softly as the sun began to hang low in the sky. “But, you're coming back, right?”

“I don't know... Garrick, please don't misunderstand me... but I... I'm different from how I used to be. Even though I have my memories... I need to find out who I am... and I don't know if I could do that with someone telling me, no matter how well intentioned they are.” I gave Minagi a shocked look since I never really told her what I saw in her – just that she seemed more like the Real Minagi as opposed to the programmed one.

Minagi caught the look and gave me a sad smile. “Don't worry. You didn't really mean it. At least you never said anything about it. But I can see what it is you would like me to be, Garrick,” she said as she gently caressed my face, that smile never leaving her lips. “A wife... and a mother... I love you, Garrick, for everything you have done for me... but I don't know if I am ready for that.”

“I'm sorry...” I said softly.

“Oh Garrick! You sweet silly man!” cried Minagi, exasperated and amused at once. “You never forced the issue. You never even asked. You just let me be free to do as I wished. The only time you ever stopped me from doing anything was our first night together.”

“I... did?” I asked, a bit clueless.

Minagi smiled. “You didn't intend it, but you did. You put your arm around me... and kept me from running when Ryoko showed up. And I am so happy you did because you showed me that you would accept me... even though I tried to kill you and Tenchi.”

“I... just wanted you to see... we really do care about you.”

“I know you do Garrick. But I have to go. Please, let me go.”

I sighed heavily. Minagi had to do this. She must. She needed the time to come to realize who she really was. And that meant not having anyone looking over her shoulder and trying to suggest what she ought to do.

With no other choice, I pulled Minagi into a tight embrace.

“I'm going to miss you,” I whispered to her.

“Me too. Will you wait for me?”

“Tsunami herself couldn't keep me.”

“I'll hold you to that, Garrick Grimm.”

Slowly, reluctantly, we let each other go, our fingertips slipping apart last as though we had been clinging together like our lives depended on it. Minagi gave me one last sad, tearful smile, then teleported into *Hinase*. The ship lifted off gently, at last disturbing the water as it did so, and as it lifted off it began to fade from view as the Storming Field came online to hide it from prying eyes and radars.

I was outside on the boardwalk for a very long time afterwards.

In the end, I came to realize that while I had set out to try and circumvent some of the pain that would come, I had instead brought it all upon myself and Minagi.

I felt like such a heel.

Eventually, I got over it. My newfound family would not let me feel sorry for myself. Especially not Sasami-chan. The effort she put into lifting my spirits always made me wonder about her true feelings... but I would always just chalk it up to her place in the grand scheme of things.

With everyone's help, though, I bounced back and things returned to normal. The one exception being now that Yosho and Ayeka felt I was proficient enough in the etiquette of the Royal Household and the political system, my education in swordsmithing took that lesson's place in my routine.

Washu, being the cagey sort she was, convinced Yakage to donate his memory engrams so she could create an educational program for me.

I had to admit, it took some getting used to. Not because it looked just like him. Far from it, in fact – it presented itself as a blue-colored amorphous man-shaped figure roughly the same size as

Yakage had been... but as dull and featureless as a department store mannequin. The only way for it to emote was through its voice, and even that was a somewhat tinny sounding replica of Yakage's own voice, as though it had been recorded on a cheap microphone – the sort that used to come with a personal computer as a gimmick.

Washu was very specific about its capabilities. The construct had Yakage's memories. It could perform some advanced problem solving using his knowledge. It could even suggest a few ideas based on what it knew.

But its long-term memory was immutable. It never learned and never changed. It was hardly even self-aware. While it could help me with a research topic, there lay the extent of its capabilities.

Essentially, it was like a holocron from Star Wars.

That hadn't been Washu's intention, but that's what we had. Regardless, I was grateful for it. With it, I would eventually gain the mastery that Yakage had desired for me.

Come hell or high water, I will make that man proud of me.

Some people call me crazy. Personally, I think it's kinda silly, because really, you have to be at least a little crazy to get by in life and still keep smiling. However at times I have to wonder about my sanity myself.

This was especially true as I calmly reached over from the passenger seat in my truck and turned the ignition to 'OFF'. Scrapy's engine immediately stopped without even a sputter and the truck jerked to a halt in the fallow field.

And then Mihoshi bawled.

I sighed. "Mihoshi, I'm not angry and you're not in trouble."

Mihoshi's crying stopped as quickly as Scrapy's engine had, only she hiccuped before she asked, "You're not? I'm not?"

"No," I said mildly. "I only stopped the engine because you were going too fast. We would have run out of room before you could react."

"Oh. Okay," replied Mihoshi both mollified and mystified.

"Now, try not to forget – the only thing we're doing here is getting you used to working the clutch. Nothing more, nothing less."

It had been a slow process thus far, but I knew that going into it. And fortunately, Murphy seemed content to let the whole thing slide. Though it might be because I was doing this in as much of a controlled condition as I could manage.

For one thing, we were using one of the fields that Tenchi was letting go fallow for a couple rotations, and at a time when the ground had enough wild grass and not so much water that my truck would get stuck.

For another, I was using the simple, step-by-step method my father taught me for learning to drive a vehicle with a manual transmission. The first step was just learning to get a feel for the clutch – where it grabs, where it lets go... but most importantly, where that sweet spot in between is for getting a car moving.

The second step was where we were at at that moment. This was using the clutch and the accelerator to get the vehicle moving, and then stopping. Just starting and stopping in first gear. Nothing fancy at all.

"Now, put the transmission into neutral gear."

"Alright. Done."

"Good. Clutch in."

"Clutch in."

“Now start the engine.”

“Starting!” Mihoshi turned the key, and the engine turned over, catching swiftly. “I did it!”

I smiled encouragingly to her. “Good. Clutch still in?”

“Yes.”

“Shift the transmission into first gear again.”

“Okay.”

“That's Reverse gear Mihoshi. First is on the opposite end of the key.”

“Oh! Right!”

“Good. Now, begin the exercise.”

And so it went. Mihoshi would get Scrappy rolling, and then stop him nice and easy like. By the time Tenchi came over with his tools, signifying the end of the day, I had Mihoshi turning easy circles in the field.

“Hey Gar-kun,” said Tenchi breezily as Mihoshi and I got out so we could all trade places. “How did it go today?”

“It went great!” I said happily. “Mihoshi's a good learner, but it's easy to overwhelm her sometimes. If she and I take this just a little at a time she'll be driving like a pro in no time.”

“So what will we do tomorrow, Onii-chan?” asked Mihoshi as she got into the jumpseat on the passenger side.”

“We'll keep practicing starting and stopping and maybe we'll start on second gear.”

“Yay!” cheered Mihoshi.

Honestly, I wasn't entirely clear on the legalities of the matter. In all essence, I was an unlicensed instructor teaching someone else to drive an automobile. In America, so long as you were on private land, you could tell the law to shove it and exactly how far.

The Japanese tend to be a little more strict in matters of public safety, but on the other hand they also tend to let the private matters of families and their close friends be. This stemming from the days when the local law didn't get involved with the household affairs of a Samurai and his allies. Let the man's superiors handle his conduct. I could find it admirable in some ways, but at other times...

Best for me not to dwell on that matter anyhow.

The whole point as to make sure that Mihoshi was prepared for her formal driving instruction. I'd told the others about what had gone on before – how she had embarrassed the driving school and that Ryoko lost that bet she made with Sasami-chan.

So, after two weeks of instructing Mihoshi, she was driving my truck through the fields like a rally racer.

“I think you're ready,” I said with a smile as Tenchi approached with his tools.

“You really think so!?” cried out Mihoshi gleefully.

“Yeah. Just keep it slow and remember the difference between the tachometer and the speedometer.”

“The tachometer only indicates the speed of the engine's crankshaft.”

“That's a girl!” I praised her, and Mihoshi glowed as she wiggled gleefully. “The one thing you'll have to be careful about is the difference between my vehicle and the rest of the vehicles made for use here in Japan.”

“The driver side is on the left so all the controls are mirrored.”

“You got it. You ready to take us back to the house?”

“I can?” she asked, her eyes brightening.

“Absolutely. I'm sure you can handle it fine. Just remember-”

“Slow and easy,” Mihoshi finished for me.

“Outstanding.” I then got out and looked to Tenchi as he loaded his tools in through the tailgate. “Ready?”

“Mihoshi's driving back?” he asked cautiously.

“Yep. She's got it all down pat.”

As Mihoshi drove us back down to the house like she'd been doing it all her life, I never suspected that it would lead to such an upheaval in my existence here in Japan.

“Hello! This is the Masaki Residence!” I heard Sasami-chan's voice chirping through my open door. One thing I made sure of was that the acoustics in my space were exceptional – voices carried clearly without echoing and yet sharp noises would be muffled.

“Oh? You mean Garrick? Hold on please.”

“Bwa?” I muttered as I turned away from my current project – shopping for computer parts online (Washu had to finagle me an internet connection with a pirated satellite link since there was no DSL service here... yet). The process was turning into a headache anyhow since stuff that was fifteen years out of date by my perspective was selling for top dollar. I poked my head out the doorway just as Sasami was approaching.

“Nii-chan, Someone from Mihoshi's driving school wants to talk to you.”

I blinked at that. “Isn't that strange,” I murmured as I followed her down to the phone by the front door.

“Hello!” I said cheerfully once I picked up the handset. “This is Garrick speaking.”

“My name is Obito Mihara. Mr. Grimm, please pardon me, but do you know a young woman by the name of Mihoshi Kuramitsu?”

“Ah yes, I do. She is a good friend of mine. Almost like family.”

“I see, so that's why she refers to you as her big brother. Mr. Grimm... Miss Kuramitsu has been experiencing some... difficulties... here at our driving school.” I sighed quietly at that. I guess there was just no cheating fate sometimes. Before I could say anything he went on, “She has been insisting that the only person that can teach her is you, Mr. Grimm. For that reason, I would respectfully ask if you could set aside some time to come visit us.”

Hoo boy. “Ah, Mr. Mihara, if this is about my informal training of Miss Kuramitsu, the I assure you that no laws were violated to my knowledge.”

“Please don't worry about that Mr. Grimm. In all honesty, I am curious to see the techniques that you employ in teaching such a case as Miss Kuramitsu's.”

“Oh dear,” I breathed as I could only imagine the chaos that Mihoshi was putting all the other instructors through. “Well... in that case, would it be alright if I made a demonstration at a time when no other drivers are on your obstacle course?”

“I think we can manage that. Why do you ask?”

“In a case like Miss Kuramitsu's, its best of she is not overwhelmed. She can learn to cope, but it requires time, patience, and a very gentle learning curve.”

“I see your point. In that case, would this Saturday morning be acceptable?”

“Perfectly Mr. Mihara. It will be my pleasure.”

That Saturday, Mihoshi and I showed up bright and early to meet Mr. Mihara. Much to our surprise, a young girl jumped out of the car we had thought to be Mr. Mihara's. She was a spritely little thing wearing a maroon turtleneck, a charcoal colored wool skirt, a pink jacket one size too large with a plaid lining, and white and pink sneakers. She had a red hairbow pulling her ebony bangs back and she was wearing a million dollar smile on her face.

She was followed by the old man himself - a burly man with a weathered, smiling face, thick gray hair that was combed back, and wearing a brown three piece suit.

“Oh, that girl is adorable!” I said softly, my heart aching for a brief moment as I thought of what it would be like to have a daughter like her.

Mihoshi giggled. “She's about Sasami-chan's age.” Mihoshi then took on a saddened cast as she said. “I hope I don't let her down.”

A man in a leather jacket and a ski mask elbowed past me and I froze. *What? Wait a minute! Not this!* I began to run, praying my feet would carry me quickly enough.

The adorable girl screamed.

I jumped.

“Don't-” said the masked man, but my foot interrupted him. He flipped backwards, his head cracking on the pavement. He was out like a lamp.

I righted myself and turned to the girl. “Are you okay!?” I asked.

She never got the chance to answer because I then heard the SUV's engine revving. I saw it coming – straight for me and the girl.

Oh Goddess no!

If there is one thing I can say that I honestly specialize in, it's taking a fall. You could almost call me cat-like in that regard. And in some ways, taking a hit is not much different in taking a fall.

I grabbed the tiny girl up in my arms, turn my back to the SUV, jumped, and then prayed to whoever was watching over me.

Pain burst like a gasoline-filled water balloon to a match, starting in my hips and going up through my spine, shoulders, neck, and then my head. I felt myself roll across the SUV and I tightened my hold on the girl – she was Sasami-chan's age and yet she was so tiny! - protecting her face and keeping her arms pinned her chest. I curled around her as I rolled, keeping my weight off her. I rolled again – dimly I realized it had no luggage rack and I was thankful for this.

Suddenly, the SUV disappeared from under me and gravity pulled us back down. Pain came once more as my left shoulder took the brunt of our weight on impact. Oddly enough, the first thing I saw was the gun the masked man had used. I recognized it as an M9 Beretta – military issue.

“Mihoshi!” I called out, my voice twisted by the pain. “Shoot the tires!”

“Oh! Right!” Mihoshi answered. And just like that she whipped her GP Standard Issue Particle Projector Pistol and let loose. Interesting thing: Mihoshi is a beautiful woman to look at – even when she's staring down at you with all the righteous fury of a woman scorned. It is a pity we don't get to see this side of her more often.

Of course, Mihoshi being Mihoshi, she missed the tires completely. Instead she managed to burn away the tie-down lines on a truck loaded with furniture – a futon flopped over the SUV and the driver lost control, sending it careening into the water on the other side of the embankment.

Seeing that it was done, I flopped onto my back. Suddenly, the tiny weight on my chest that I had forgotten about shifted. The little girl appeared in my field of vision, her gorgeous, brown, oriental eyes worried with concern.

“Are you okay?” she asked, horrified at how I appeared.

“No,” I croaked honestly. I then smiled ruefully. “But I'll get better and live a long life. What is important is that you're okay, my tiny little bird.” I stole a quick glance to the side and saw the masked man. His body... didn't look right.

“YUKI!” cried out the old man as he ran up to us. I was starting to hear sirens in the distance.

“Grandpa!” cried out the girl, Yuki I now knew, as she jumped up and hugged her grandfather, no worse for wear. And then she began to tug him back towards me. “He's hurt pretty bad grandpa.”

“Big Brother!” cried out Mihoshi as she ran over.

I thought fast. Mihoshi needed something to do, and I didn't want Yuki to see the mangled body of her would-be kidnapper.

“Yuki, is that your name?” I asked. The girl nodded. “I want you to do me a favor. Put your head on my chest and listen to my heart. Tell me how it sounds. Mihoshi?”

“Yes Big Brother?”

“Go get the jacket from that man with the mask – I may need to be kept warm. Once you do that, call Washu-chan. She'll know what to do.”

“So, you are Mr. Grimm,” said the Grandfather.

“At your service,” I replied with a rueful smile. “I assume you are Mr. Mihara?”

“Yes, I am him...” He then looked down to his granddaughter and said, “How does Mr. Grimm's heart sound, Yuki?”

Yuki yelped and turned bright red. *Uh-oh*, I thought to myself, shooting a look to Mr. Mihara. The old man simply smiled as though to say, 'Little girls, they're all the same.'

“His heart sounds kinda fast, but it's strong and steady.”

I smiled. “My heart always runs a bit fast. I think I'll be just fine.”

“Here, Big Brother,” called out Mihoshi as came over and began to drape the jacket over me. “Washu-chan says she's on her way now.”

“Thanks Mihoshi,” I said as I tried not to move – now that the adrenaline rush was past I was really starting to ache. Thank you, Washu-chan – those tweaks are working just as you prescribed.

And speaking of the devil, Washu-chan came running over.

“GARRICK!” she cried out. “How in the holy name of the Golden Ratio do you keep winding up like this?” Yuki and Mr. Mihara backed away to let Washu do her business, but little Yuki stayed close by. The police were arriving and Mr. Mihara decided that, seeing as his daughter was safe, it would be best to deal with the police for the moment. He was, after all, a highly respected member of the community.

I aimed my rueful smile at Washu-chan and said, “Sorry about this Washu-chan. I guess I'm just a stupid American that can't keep his nose out of other peoples' business.”

Washu snorted. “At least you're honest. Let's see how bad you are.”

“Careful of the left shoulder, I think I managed to dislocate it.”

I winced as Washu probed it carefully. “Yeah, it is alright. Let's see what else is wrong.” She popped up a discreet holographic screen that displayed diagnostic information from some medical nanomachines that had been left in my system for just this purpose. Yuki gazed in wide-eyed shock, but I simply smiled and put my index finger to my lips. “Shhhh.”

Yuki nodded vigorously, smiling gleefully. I knew that look – this meant she now had a Big Secret. I didn't mind. Sasami could probably use a friend that was not simply outside the weirdness at our home, but also knew about it. This way she could really let her hair down, so to speak.

“Well, you got lots of bruises, some strained tendons and ligaments... but for the most part it looks like your upgrades are doing their job. You'll be sore for a day or two, but you should still be able to move around, especially once we fix that shoulder of yours.”

“Uhm, Washu-chan?”

“Yes Garrick?”

“You did design these upgrades to be invisible to the medical technology of Earth, right?”

“I did, why?”

“Because I see paramedics coming my way, and knowing them they'll want to keep me overnight at the very least.”

“Oh.”

The next few hours were a whirlwind. Once the paramedics determined that my life was in no danger they permitted the police to question me as they prepared me to be transported to the hospital. I told them that I saw the man with the mask on – noticed that he seemed to be very suspicious and that he was heading straight for Yuki Mihara. I then told them that I had see the outline of the gun through his jacket – a little white lie, but one that wouldn't hurt – and that I knew for certain that he intended harm for that girl.

As for Mihoshi's gun... well, Mr. Mihara is a very practical man. He simply claimed that he saw no such weapon. Perhaps the load on that truck hadn't been properly secured?

One last thing I felt I had to do was to call specific attention to the gun: namely it's military characteristics that I was intimately familiar with.

With that, the police officers blinked, called up their headquarters, reported the characteristics of the gun in question, got their answers, and then bowed and thanked me for my hard work. And then they politely asked that I try not to do anything so brash again.

However, for one of the patrolmen this was not quite enough.

“Why do you Americans have to meddle like this?” he growled, despite his partner urging him to leave me be. I glared back at the man and then pointed my nose to Yuki, who was talking and laughing with Mihoshi.

“You see that little girl over there? I meddled because I was not about to let an innocent child suffer at the hands of those honorless thugs.”

“You seriously mean that you didn't do this for any sort of glory!?”

“Officer, I am in PAIN here. You think I wanted to mess myself up just to gain recognition? Hell, I didn't even think the driver would be so cowardly as to try and run us all over with his truck. My only concern was that innocent little girl.”

“Just don't do it anymore,” grumbled the officer as he stalked off.

The others all came to visit me. Ayeka chastised me for being reckless... then congratulated me on showing that I had a true heart of a nobleman. Sasami-chan simply gave me a kiss on the cheek and wished that her courageous Onii-chan gets better soon. Tenchi said I was crazy, but in a good way. Ryoko said I was pretty damn cool for pulling a stunt like that. Mihoshi lamented my refusal to become a GP officer so she could have me as her partner.

And then Mr. Mihara showed up with Yuki, and I asked everyone to leave so I can speak privately with Mr. Mihara.

“I never did thank you properly for what you did today, Mr. Grimm,” the old man said. “My granddaughter could have been traumatized for life from her experience today... but because of you, she is happy and smiling instead.” The old man smiled and laughed. “You would think that she went on some grand adventure from the way she describes it! Isn't that something? Children have such vivid imaginations.”

I smiled back at the happy grandfather. “I know what you mean. I still remember what it was like being a child and imagining such things. I suppose that's part of why I did what I did today. I remember being a child, and how hard it is when my hopes and dreams were crushed. I wouldn't wish that heartbreak on anyone.”

Mr. Mihara nodded knowingly. “It's a shame you do not seem to have any children of your own, Mr. Grimm. I suspect if you did you would probably be a great father. But regardless, we do need to talk about your future.”

“My future?” I replied in surprise. “Do you have something in mind, Mr. Mihara?”

Mr. Mihara smiled at me. “If your method of instruction does indeed prove to be effective, then I will employ you immediately.”

I blinked. “Wait, doesn't that require special certification?”

Mr. Mihara waved it off. “With my connections it is a mere formality. Mr. Grimm, I have seen Miss Kuramitsu in action recently. And I feel that if you are able to make her into a competent driver, then you would be the best teacher in the world, bar none.”

“You want me to work at your school teaching people to drive.”

“Do you have any objections about it?” Mr. Mihara said.

I frowned at that. Personally, I didn't have any real objections, but on the other hand...

“I... may have certain family obligations that would render me unavailable for weeks at a time. They tend to come on short notice.”

Mr. Mihara nodded understandingly. “Of course. In that case, we will fully document your training of Miss Kuramitsu and you will use that documentation to train several of our instructors in your training methods. Afterwards, we will retain you as a senior instructor at our school, so you will be free to take leave as you need it.”

“... Well, I can see why everyone calls you 'Chief' now. Where do I sign?”

The old man guffawed heartily. “Don't worry about it now. On Monday we'll sit down with my lawyer – you'll probably want to bring one of your own, just for your own peace of mind – and we'll draw up your contract of employment.”

I felt my eyebrows shoot up to the top of my skull. “Is that really necessary?”

“You forget yourself – you're a foreign national here in Japan, and you're going to be educating people to safely move a ton of steel down crowded streets at high speeds.”

I scoffed at that. “Oh. Sure. No pressure. None at all.” I then made a motion as though to hang myself. “GAAACK!”

Mr. Mihara laughed. “Well, at least you have a sense of humor. Which is a lot more than I can say about some of the stiffs my son has working there.”

Mr. Mihara left after exchanging some pleasantries with me. Taking his place was Sasami-chan and Yuki. Yuki seemed nervous about something and Sasami-chan kept nudging her closer to me. A sense of dread curiosity washed over me as I began to worry over what the girl might say next.

I could just hear it now. 'You bravery stole my heart away, Mr. Grimm! Please wait for me – I promise I will be a good wife.' The scary part is that it's not at all without precedence in this country.

Yuki then opened her mouth and I braced myself.

“Mr. Grimm... this is kind of embarrassing for me... but could you help me with my English homework?”

I let go of the breath I was holding and felt myself deflate with relief.

“Yuki-chan, you could ask me to help you write a doctoral thesis on American Studies and I would not mind one bit. Pull up that feeding table and get yourself settled. It's cram time.”

When I was a child, I had issues with learning to read. Fortunately, the school I went to had an incredibly comprehensive phonics and vocabulary program. All the bizarre quirks of everyday English phonetics was simplified into glyphs that were easy to memorize, and just as easy to wean us off of.

To this day, I couldn't recall all the glyphs they used, but I could remember some of the more important and useful ones – like the subtext letter 'e' to denote a silent-e, or the 'ing' with a rocker over it to denote the slurring of the three letters that was commonly used to indicate a verb.

With these tools from my childhood, I quickly marked-up Yuki's verbal practice assignment and provided her with a key... and then I began to drill her relentlessly on each of the different sounds.

“Close, but not quite,” I told her. “to make the proper 'r' sound you need to keep the tip of your tongue from touching to roof of your mouth. And don't forget – middle of your palette, not the front. The front is for the 'l' sound. Try again.”

“Okay,” sighed the little girl. As she focused on making 'ra', 'ri', 'ru', 're', and 'ro' sounds, her Grandfather and Washu-chan stepped in and watched in fascination for a moment.

“Alright, that sounded a lot better,” I praised her. “Even just with that you'll knock your classmates off their feet. But I do hope that you get better at it.”

At that, Washu stepped forward with a smile on her face, and clapped twice.

“Okay, kiddos, as much as I hate to interrupt a study session, visiting hours are over.”

“Moouuu,” moaned Sasami and Yuki at the same time.

“Oh, don't be that way you two,” I said. “Especially you, Sasami-chan. You know that visitors are always welcome in our home. We can do more study sessions later next week. Besides, aren't you gonna show her around tomorrow?”

Sasami had the decency to laugh nervously as she rubbed the back of her head. “But Gar-kun, it won't be the same without you.”

I rolled my eyes. “Of course not. Nothing is ever the same without me.”

Washu snorted. “Don't be getting so full of yourself now. C'mon. Time to let Mr. Courageous get some beauty rest.”

The girls and I waved goodbye to each other as they left, but Washu-chan stayed behind for just a moment longer.

“You know, from what you've told me things might not have gone so badly if you'd just let them play out as they were supposed to.”

I sighed at that. “You should know better, Washu-chan. Temporal Momentum may be in effect, but so is the Butterfly Effect. Yakage was supposed to die months ago. Instead, he hung in there for as long as he could, teaching me what he can.”

“It was your idea,” Washu shot back mildly.

“I thought you were the one that put it into his head that I should be his student.”

“And you were the one that put it in *my* head that I should do something about it. Therefore, your idea. Not mine.”

“Ugh,” I groaned. “Semantics! Either way, he could very well have decided to go through with fighting Tenchi anyhow. Blaze of glory and all.”

Washu sighed herself now. “Look, we'll have this argument later, Garrick. Just get some rest or else...” She then put on a Stepford Smile so horrifying that it would have sent a chill down *my* spine if I didn't know Washu that well. “...I'll drug you to sleep myself.”

I snorted at that display. “Get the hell outta here ya damn lunatic.”

Washu just cackled insanely, undoubtedly raising the hackles of every woman at the nurses station as she went. I just smiled and shook my head – kinda hard not to love that mad scientist.

I woke up the next morning, stiff and tired, but the staff informed me that I was to be discharged no matter how bad I felt – they had no more reason to keep me there, and as the old saw goes, a hospital bed made is a hospital bed filled.

Of course, it seemed that no one back home remembered.

Suddenly, a familiar looking sedan pulled up. In the back seat was not the Mr. Mihara I knew, but a somewhat younger specimen that resembled him... along with a much much younger face that I knew only too well.

“Ah! Yuki-chan! What are you doing here?”

“We came to see you, Gar-kun! But I thought you would be inside still.”

“Nah. I got discharged today, though I sure could use a nice long soak in the bath. I'm stiff as a board.”

“Come with us then! We were going to your house after we saw you anyhow.”

“Ah, thank you so much. I would appreciate that, and it seems they forgot about me anyhow.”

“So, you are the Mr. Grimm I've heard so much about,” said the man as he stepped out of the vehicle. “My daughter speaks very highly of you. As does my Father.”

“I assume then that you are Mr. Mihara?”

“I am. It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance,” he said as he bowed to me.

“The pleasure is all mine,” I replied.

“Of course. Please, get in. There's quite a bit I would like to discuss along the way.”

Mr. Mihara's sedan was more like a small limousine on the inside. It was so roomy that the three of us fit into the back seat without even touching. Although Yuki surprisingly grabbed ahold of my arm.

I gave the girl a bemused look.

“Yuki-chan,” said her father somewhat gruffly. “You're making him uncomfortable.”

“Oh no! It's alright Mr. Mihara. She just reminds me of some of my little cousins from back home. They're all grown now, so it's actually pretty nostalgic for me.”

Mr. Mihara grunted softly and nodded. “Anyhow... I've heard many interesting things about you, Mr. Grimm. Double-doctorate in Engineering fields, patent holder of that automotive diesel-electric system, you practice swordplay, you're a veteran of the US Navy, and you teach the most hopeless person behind the wheel of a car I have ever seen to drive like a professional. But most importantly, you save my daughter, coming down on those men like a professional bodyguard. Who are you, Mr. Grimm, and what are you doing here in Okayama?”

“Ah... I think someone has loose lips,” I quipped.

Mr. Mihara simply scowled at me.

I sighed and went on, “I'm a man that would like to leave a sorrowful past behind Mr. Mihara. I came to Japan to do that. If I hadn't broken down on the doorstep of the Masaki family, I may very well have just become a truck driver so I could continue wandering this beautiful country.”

“Oh? And why would the Masaki family take you in? I know that old Priest is a good man, but he's not always one to take in strays.”

I shrugged. “Because there is a little girl over there that would have been heart broken. She's good like that. She can read people like a book. She didn't have to read into me too deeply to know how bad off I was and absolutely demanded they adopt me.”

“And what of your own family?”

I shook my head slowly. “Gone. No trace. I miss them horribly, but nothing I do will bring them back. So, I just try to move on as best as I can.” Yuki's grip on my arm tightened.

Mr. Mihara gave me a hard look. “I would think I would have heard something about that. All but one of a family in America disappears into nothing? The news outlets would feed on that like sharks.”

“It just goes to show you, the most tragic tales are the ones you never hear about until you come face-to-face with them. One good friend of mine... she was taken from her family by the local government because it was felt that they didn't have the means to care for her. The foster family she was given to only wanted her to be a perfect little doll – a status symbol. When she began to rebel, they sent her to a reform school. Only because she didn't want to be a perfect little stuffed doll that just sat in a room and looked pretty.

“She grew up, always fighting, always on the defensive. She was molested and had to learn how to do horrible things like spitting razor blades just to protect herself. But she did grow up. She became a tough, no-nonsense person with a sense of humor so crass that it was simply not fit for polite company.

“But in her own way, she was beautiful. She was strong in way few women are, and yet still very much a woman. I honestly admired her.”

Mr. Mihara gave me an odd look. “You speak of her almost as though she were a lover.”

I snorted. “Her preference was bad-boys-gone-good. And that was exactly what she had – an honorable and just man who was a complete and total bad-boy. Even if she didn't have him around I wouldn't have stood a chance. Back then I was just a victim trying to come out of his shell. If anything, I was her Little Brother. And I am ever grateful for them taking care of me when I needed it.”

Mr. Mihara nodded, seemingly satisfied. “I see then. In that case, I will not trouble you over your past. You seem to be a highly virtuous man anyhow. You're in that house surrounded by all those women... you're either gay or you've got the will of Buda himself!”

“Ugh, no thanks,” I groaned. “I'd very much like to find a nice woman for myself and start a family.”

Yuki suddenly buried her face in my shoulder.

Mr. Mihara gave me a look. I nodded and mouthed the word 'Later' while gesturing at Yuki. He nodded in understanding.

Man, I hated having to break a little girl's heart, but at least I could nip this in the bud and let her down easily.

Back home, I was greeted with embarrassed expressions, to which Washu-chan promptly whacked everyone from Tenchi on down to Sasami over the head with a paper fan.

While Sasami showed Yuki around, Yoshō had tea with Mr. Mihara and I went for a nice two-hour-long soak in my own tub inside my C-Space. Eventually, though, I did get to feeling like a boiled chicken, so I got out and made myself presentable once more before going outside.

Mr. Mihara had already left – Yuki would stay the night and I was to bring her to school tomorrow. I was feeling much better that evening, so I took Yuki and Sasami-chan up to the shrine so they could leave offerings and wishes there.

“Oh, Gar-kun, I thought you should know that I showed Yuki Washu-chan's lab.”

I smiled knowingly as we walked sedately down the steps on our way back to the house. “So, you know everything then, Yuki-chan?”

“Unh,” replied Yuki. “It's so cool! I never thought I would get to have a princess from another planet as a friend. But what are you, Gar-kun?”

“I'm human. I just come from a slightly different version of Earth and a couple decades into the future.”

“What was it like there?”

“Pretty tough. It's not like it was all ravaged by nuclear war or anything, but there were all kinds of troubles. Rich people getting richer, poor people getting poorer, economic recessions, polarized governments, terrorism all over the place, brush fire wars, revolutions, expensive fuel, and so on and so forth.”

“That is tough,” Yuki replied thoughtfully. “I'm glad you don't have to live there anymore.”

“Well, speaking of tough, do you still have homework left?”

“Not really. But if you don't mind, I would like help with my English again.”

I smiled. “Sure thing, small stuff. I'll show you my room next. It's a bit like Washu-chan's lab, but nowhere nearly as big.”

As soon as we got back, Yuki went charging up the stairs, startling Ayeka at first. But Yuki, reading Ayeka perfectly, apologized politely before running up to my door. Not hard to figure out since

it's like Washu's door, just colored differently. Ayeka smiled and chuckled at the girl's energy and enthusiasm while I gave way for her to pass by on the stairs.

“And people wonder why I want kids of my own,” I said sotto-voiced to the Princess.

Ayeka chuckled once more. “Dear Brother, I can hardly wait for the day. Just make sure we get a chance to inspect the woman before you marry her.”

“Of course,” I said distractedly, looking over to Yuki, who was giving me an impatient look.

I spent the entire afternoon showing her my space and all the things I did. I showed her the smithy and how I practiced my hand at crafting swords. I showed her the garden room with all my wonderful plants and my Juraian Seedling, which beamed happily for Yuki, causing her face to light up with joy. I showed her the workshop where I put Scooby together. I showed her my drafting table and workstation where I did my CAD and 3D design work. I showed her my library, all my reading nooks, and my little kitchen. I even showed her the bath.

Once all that was done, we cracked open her English workbook and got to work.

Yuki actually surprised me – she was pronouncing the words with very little trouble. She still had a distinctly Japanese accent, but she was perfectly understandable. She must have been practicing with a religious fervor to improved as much as she did.

“I think we've practiced enough. Sasami-chan should have dinner done soon so why don't we go downstairs.”

“Gar-kun... before we go outside there is something I want to tell you...”

Oh boy, here it comes...

“I... I like you. I really do like you, Gar-kun! I think you are incredibly nice and very smart! You're also tough and strong and cool! I love how you saved me yesterday! You picked me up and kept me safe in your strong arms! I think I like your arms the most... they make me feel safe.”

I sighed heavily, kneeled down to Yuki's level and pulled her into a hug.

“I like you, too, Yuki. I just wish you were ten years older.”

“But you can wait, right?” The way she said that set off alarm bells in my head.

I pulled away from the precocious little girl. “Who told you that?”

“Sasami-chan.”

I rolled my eyes. “That little imp. Why would she say something like that?”

“She said that Katherine would keep you young and healthy for a very long time.”

She would!? I thought to myself. I knew the little seedling had taken an immediate liking to me from the moment it sprouted, but I think I would have noticed if Katherine had bonded to me. Even so, I was starting to wonder what exactly the women in my life were hiding from me. I wanted to dwell on this matter more, but there was a more immediate concern at hand.

“And what about you?” I asked Yuki.

“She said she'd find a tree that liked me too.”

I sighed and rolled my eyes. “Little brat covered all the bases.” Yuki giggled at my expense and I cut a mildly scathing look at her. “Okay then, what if you have to share me with another woman?”

Yuki gave me a determined look. If she were older and of the right mindset, I would suspect that she'd try pinning me to a wall.

“Sasami-chan told me about her grandmother and how she likes to play matchmaker. She also told me about her mother and her step-mother and how they're best friends even though they share the same husband. If Grandmother Seto finds you another wife, then I would do my best to be her friend.”

I suddenly felt like Agent J in *Men In Black* when he fired the Noisy Cricket the first time – thrown across a room and flattened. And then I realized what had just happened:

I just had my first face vault.

What. The. Hell.

Okay, I thought as I picked myself back up, time to shift tactics.

“Look, Yuki... This is just a crush you're having. You can't tell me you haven't had one before now.”

“I don't care. You need someone that will stay with you Gar-kun. I won't leave you alone. I'll take care of you and have your babies.”

BAM! Again! Evidently this plan of attack wouldn't work, either.

“Whah!” I said incoherently as I got back up again. “A little young to be thinking that far ahead, aren't you?”

Yuki went bright red. “Ah... Um... well... it's only natural... when a woman loves a man that she has his children. And I want someone who is nice and smart and strong and tough like you are to be my baby's father.” She then looked down to the floor. “They'd have the best father in the world.”

“Yuki, you're dodging the question.”

“It wouldn't be right away!” she yelled suddenly, eyes screwed shut. “Not right away. I want to at least wait until I graduate from high school. Sasami-chan said she'll teach me everything about being part of the Royal Household. She said she'll even get Mr. Yoshō to teach me to fight for myself.”

“Wait, what!? You want to learn swordsmanship from Yoshō!?” Yuki looked up at me, beaming nothing but pure innocent confusion.

“Ah... is that wrong?”

I sighed heavily. “Yuki... This really isn't some game. It isn't some fantasy story. Your life would be in real danger. Is that what you want?”

Yuki closed her eyes and hugged me tightly. “I want to be strong like you, Gar-kun.”

“No, you don't,” I told her firmly as I gently pushed her away.

“Why not?” she replied petulantly.

“Because being strong like me means having everything you ever wanted, everything you ever loved withheld and ripped away from you. That includes me.”

“You mean...” Yuki gazed back up at me in horror. “You really did lose everyone in your family?”

“Yes. I had a large family back home. Five brothers, one sister, nephews, nieces, aunts, uncles, great-aunts, great-uncles, and more cousins and second-cousins than you can shake a stick at. And I will never ever get to see them again.”

Yuki's eyes were sorrowful, but there was also resolve. “That is part of why I want to be with you, Gar-kun. I want to help you by being the most important part of Gar-kun's new family.”

I sighed explosively. I hate this. I do like this girl. She's a sweet little thing and a hard worker. And evidently she was very dedicated. Tsunami's sake – Yuki wanted to learn to fight so she could validate her claim to me with the Juraians!

“Look... Yuki, you said you wanted to wait until after high school, right?”

“Yes!” she cried out brightly.

“Okay then. Then you'll just have to wait until after high school.”

“Eh?” said Yuki as she frowned, not quite getting what I was saying. “What do you mean?”

“We can see each other. I can still help you with your homework. But until you graduate from high school then we can't be anything more than family friends.”

“I'll do it then!” snapped Yuki. “And just so you know how serious I am, I promise you I will graduate three years early!”

If I had been drinking anything that would have been a spit-take right there. This girl would be the death of me. I just knew it.

“Is everything okay, Gar-kun?” asked Tenchi as we both scrubbed ourselves down. Tonight he insisted that we bathe together and have a bit of brother-time. I know, second bath of the night, but my body could use the therapy, and Tenchi needed this.

“Not really,” I said.

“But I thought you'd be okay by now,” Tenchi replied in surprise.

“It's the girl, Yuki Mihara. Earlier she and Sasami got to talking, and now Yuki has got it in her head that I'm the best candidate to be her husband.”

“What!? But she's too young!”

“I know, Tenchi. But on the other hand, she's honestly shaken up, so I can see how she's got this crush on me, but still...”

Tenchi just laughed. “Welcome to my world.”

I shot Tenchi a look as I put my toiletries away. “The only one of your group that is underage is Sasami-chan. And she, at least, is going to wait until she's the proper age.”

We both went outside and sunk ourselves into the steaming hot water.

“Still... I did at least get her to promise to wait until she graduated from high school.”

“That's something at least,” said Tenchi.

Suddenly, we heard a shoji open and then shut. “Oh hell no,” I breathed. I then cut a look at Tenchi. “Tenchi! Stay calm, let me handle this!”

Tenchi, his eyes wide in panic, only nodded quickly. The last time this happened my advice wasn't... followed.

“Hooiii!” I called out. “The bath is occupied right now! Not a good idea to come out, especially if you're a girl.”

“Oh?” came a coy sounding husky voice. “But I'm not a girl.” Ryoko then appeared around the corner wearing absolutely nothing at all. “I am a woman.”

I sighed. Damn, she had an epic body, but that was to be expected given who her mother was.

“Ryoko, is there any way I can convince you to let us be tonight?”

Ryoko put her index finger to her lips as she pursed the, looking off into the distance as she hummed thoughtfully.

“Nope!” she finally said brightly.

I cursed colorfully under my breath. Knowing several languages certainly added spice to one's ability to sound foulmouthed. Grandpa Charles would have been proud.

“Alright then. C'mon Tenchi. It's not as big as this, but you and I can share my tub without any problems.”

“Oh, c'mon you guys! Please stay!” Ryoko pleaded. “I just want to chat. You know, how do you Americans put it... 'Shoot the breeze'?”

“That is the term for it,” I allowed as I began to think. “Okay how about this then. Tenchi? Do you mind if Ryoko bathes with us as long as she behaves herself? No touching, no teasing, just small talk?”

“Ah... but... she's naked!” said Tenchi.

I then look to Ryoko.

“Look, I don't get what the big deal is,” said Ryoko hotly. “I mean, there's no point to covering myself up here! I refuse to be ashamed of my body. Besides, this is supposed to be relaxation time, and if I could have my way I'd be running around without clothes all the time.”

I blinked. “You're a nudist!?”

“Yeah. Problem?”

I thought about that for a second. “No, not really. Just... damn, that's a dangerous distraction.”

Ryoko cackled and just went over to start scrubbing down.

I looked to Tenchi. "Are you alright with this?"

"Ah... not... really."

"Why not?"

"Because it's not proper!"

"And why is it not proper?"

"Ah... because... uhm..."

"Look, Tenchi, Ryoko doesn't have any problem with it at all. She's a nudist. Weren't you paying attention? That means she doesn't care who sees her body."

"You mean... she's not trying to seduce me?"

"No, but I bet she would absolutely love to hear what you think of her body. It's a point of pride for a woman that the man she likes has good things to say about it."

"Oh, I see... let me think about it for a minute." The minutes ticked by. Ryoko hummed cheerfully as she scrubbed herself down. Tenchi fidgeted nervously. I simply laid back and let the warm water swirl gently around me.

"Okay you guys, I'm coming in," said Ryoko.

"You know, Tenchi, if it helps you don't have to look. Just wait until she gets in the water and you can just look at her face."

"Ah, good idea."

Ryoko chuckled as she entered the water. "But why wouldn't he look at me?"

I sighed. "It's a matter of respect, Ryoko. He's been raised to think it is disrespectful to gaze on a woman's naked body. Unfortunately, that upbringing failed to include what to do when a woman freely displays herself. That is, he doesn't understand the mindset of a nudist."

"And you do."

I nodded. "For one thing, you feel that clothing is simply confining. For another, you feel that your body is like a work of art, and not something to be ashamed of. Your body is beautiful and it would make you feel selfish if you kept it only to yourself."

"My my!" Ryoko said, feigning bashfulness. "Such a flatterer. Why, if Tenchi didn't already own my heart, you might have just swept me off my feet there." I guffawed and Ryoko got a good chuckle as well before she continued, "Really, Tenchi, Gar-kun's got the right of it. Honestly, I don't care how much you do look at my body. Seducing you has nothing to do with it."

"Ah, they're finally done!" I heard Ayeka's voice as she entered the bath.

I leveled a glare at Ryoko. "YOU DIDN'T."

Ryoko laughed a soft, villainous laugh. "Oh, I did."

She. Took. Down. The. Sign.

"Ayeka! We're still in here!" I called out before she could come into view.

"With meeee~eeee!" Ryoko called out as well.

"WHAT!?" Ayeka yelled as she came charging around the corner. "BROTHER! What is the meaning of this!? I thought you were better than this!"

Ryoko then teleported out of the water and appeared again behind Ayeka.

"Relax, Princess," said Ryoko coyly as she placed her hands reassuringly on Ayeka's shoulders. "It wasn't Garrick. It was alllll me."

"What? Back to your old tricks, you pirate?" growled the irate princess.

Time to intervene! "Believe it or not, sister, seducing Tenchi wasn't her goal here."

"Brother?" said Ayeka, fixing me with a surprised glare. "Why would you say that!?"

"Because, it's true," I reaffirmed. "She kept her distance from Tenchi and the worst she did was tease him a bit."

Ayeka then cut a look at Tenchi. "Is this true, Lord Tenchi?"

Tenchi smiled nervously. "yes," he managed weakly.

Ayeka closed her eyes and sighed softly. "Very well then." She then turned and leveled a venomous look at Ryoko. "That doesn't explain why you took the warning sign down!"

I gave Ryoko a look as well.

Ryoko shrugged nonchalantly. "I figured you might want to join us."

Well, that was an interesting answer.

"Why would I?" Ayeka snapped.

"So you can enjoy Lord Tenchi's company in a relaxed setting. So you can let your hair down and drop the Princess act. So you can just sit back and relax."

Ayeka looked like she was about to boil over. It was time to intercede with a bit of reasoning – before she blew like a broken pressure cooker.

"Sister, Ryoko's got a point. You really do need to learn how to let go. I'm proud of how far you and Ryoko have come, but you're still just a little too tightly wound up."

Ayeka growled as she fumed. "ooooohhh fine then! But I'm not taking off this towel and you two are staying on that end of the bath!"

"That's perfectly fine, sister," I said soothingly.

Ayeka harrumphed and about-faced to go and scrub down before entering the bath proper.

Ryoko snickered and I gave her a sharp look.

"What!?" exclaimed the cyan-haired beauty as she slipped into the water once more.

"You know what," I shot back. "You can't push her so hard so quickly!"

Ryoko waved it off though. "Feh. She needs the push."

"Like hell I do!" came Ayeka's voice. And then Ryoko was deluged by a pan full of cold water suspended between two of Ayeka's force-projecting logs.

"BLAAARRGH!" cried out Ryoko. She then gave me a look as though to demand what I was going to do about it.

"Well, what do you expect!?" I cried out.

Ryoko then sighed and said, "Yeah, you're right. I guess I deserved that."

I cringed and kept an eye on the washing area. *Oh man! Please, Ayeka, don't follow up that remark! Please don't make a snide remark!*

Fortunately, none was forthcoming. Instead, Ayeka quickly finished scrubbing, rinsed, then came over, wrapped in her bath towel, her nose turned up from Ryoko. I sighed in relief as she slid into the water without any further fuss.

Suddenly, as if a switch had been thrown, Ayeka gave me a bright smile.

"Oh, Dear Brother! Sasami had mentioned to me that our adorable little guest has taken a liking to you."

I sighed once more. "It's true. She confessed her love to me earlier before we came down for dinner."

"Is that so?" said Ryoko with interest. "Little girl has got some real guts going after an older guy like you. Kinda cute, though. Neh, Ayeka? Weren't you no older when you fell for Yosho?"

Ayeka blushed. "Younger, actually."

Ryoko smiled. "So what made you fall for him anyhow? I mean, I know he wasn't hard to look at back then! Hubba-hubba!"

I couldn't help it – that got a laugh out of me. Ryoko just flashed me a wink.

"Well, there was that," Ayeka admitted. "I don't suppose that having our mothers push us together all the time helped matters."

"Matter of point," I said suddenly. "Your hair used to be cyan like Sasami-imouto's."

Ayeka's blush deepened. "I... don't like to admit it. I wanted Yoshō to like me so much. So I changed my hair color to be more like his mother's."

I gave Ayeka an encouraging smile. "Don't feel too bad, Sister. I've wanted to see what I look like with a different hair color, too."

"You have?" asked Tenchi.

I nodded. "Kinda tempted to do a gene-mod for the fun of it. But the problem is that I can only do that for stuff that's already in my genome. This is why Sister's hair has a purple tint to it – just like her Father's. I can probably get away with going for a flaming red color. I have the Irish in me for it. In fact, if you look at my whiskers carefully you'll see that a good number of them are red."

Tenchi leaned closer to get a better look and Ryoko scooted over our way as well.

"Whoah! No kidding!" said Ryoko. "Hey, Ayeka! Check this out!"

"Really?" said Ayeka as she moved closer. "Oh my!" She then spluttered into a fit of giggles.

"Eh? What's so funny?" I asked.

"Oh my... I just had the thought... what would the look on father's face be like if he saw little red heads running through the Palace on Tenju!"

Ryoko chuckled. "He'd probably wonder if Washu was up to something at first."

"Oi, what's so interesting about red hair?" asked a familiar voice.

"Speak of the devil," I said, rolling my eyes. "Hey Washu-GURK!"

Standing there was Washu, wrapped in a towel and ready for a bath... along with her was Mihoshi and Sasami...

...and Yuki.

"Yay!" cried Sasami. "Bathtime with both Tenchi-nii and Gar-kun!"

"With... Gar-kun?" stammered Yuki as she turned bright red.

Ayeka and Ryoko then proceeded to nearly drown themselves laughing.

I sighed in defeat. "I suppose this means I have to wash someone's back?"

Washu smiled knowingly. "Don't worry about it, Gar-kun. We're all big girls here. We can help each other out."

"Thank you."

"Don't thank me yet," said Washu to me, soto voiced. "I'm gonna give you hell for letting me be the last to hear about this one."

I gave Washu-chan a flat look. "Oi. You know, if you would only poke your head out your lab more often you might not have to slather on quite as much sunblock."

Washu gave me an evil smile. "Oh, it is on, buddy. It is on."

"Save it for later when Yuki-chan ain't around. The things we'll say she's not quite ready for yet."

Washu harumphed and went to help the others get scrubbed down.

I turned to everyone else.

"Dear Brother, was that what I thought it was?" asked Ayeka apprehensively.

I shrugged. "Yeah, but don't worry. She'll hold back until Yuki-chan is away tomorrow. Until then you guys have the opportunity to reach safe distance."

Ayeka then gave Ryoko a nervous smile. "Say, Ryoko, what would you think of us two going someplace far away with Tenchi tomorrow? Say, the Andromeda Galaxy?"

"Great idea!" said Ryoko with cheer that belied her terror. "Tenchi-kun?"

"YES PLEASE!" squeaked Tenchi.

The last time Washu and I had gotten into it everyone else had been sucked into the affair like they were orbiting a black hole. It probably didn't help that I had rather effectively weaponized Mihoshi's causality-bending weirdness. Washu was still trying to wrap her head around how I did that.

Really, it was simple. I just gave Mihoshi a CD-R disk carrying a variant of the Yggdrasil Bug virus (a nasty little replicating worm with a penchant for hiding in plain sight – this variant was a nuisance in that it did nothing except to make the anti-virus software go nuts) and told her that Washu wanted her to put it in the lab's computer. Everything else snowballed from Mihoshi's collateral damage.

Forest for the trees, Washu-chan, forest for the trees – I don't stop to question why a tool works, I just put it to use and stockpile the empirical evidence.

While we were waiting, Tenchi and I grabbed our towels and wrapped them around our waists without leaving the water.

“So, red huh?” asked Ryoko.

I shrugged. “Might be fun. I'd certainly turn a lot more heads, and it'd look better than Seiryu's mop.”

Ayeka snickered. “Oh, it would be wonderful if you could show him up! I can't believe they actually let him become an instructor at the GP Academy.”

“Eh,” I said, shrugging. “That'll be someone else's job.”

“Hey, is this one of those Pondstrider things of yours?” asked Ryoko.

“Nah. It's nothing important. But I'll let you ladies know when it's going down. That way you can take pictures.”

“Say, what about Yuki-chan?” asked Tenchi. “Did you know about her?”

“I knew about her,” I sighed, my shoulders slumping. “Really, all she had was a bit roll. Later on she may have been one of Sasami-chan's friends when she starts going to school, but that was about all the involvement she was supposed to have in your lives. I just wasn't expecting something like this. Though I guess I should have – her being a girl her age.” I sighed at that. *Really, I need to learn to stop meddling.*

“Well, I for one think it's adorable,” stated Ayeka. Before I could say anything, my adoptive sister went on, “Besides, if what Sasami-chan says about a tree bonding to her comes true, Father will have no choice but to let her into the family. It has happened before.”

“Something about someone hearing a tree's voice calling out to them?” I said, recalling a bit of trivia from the *101 Facts About Tenchi Muyo* article. (Fact: that tail that we see Ryoko with sometimes? Just an amusing accessory – she thinks it's cute.)

Ayeka nodded. “They have that ability. When a tree senses that it's match is in the vicinity, it will call out to that person with its telepathic voice. I have seen it happen once – a young boy that was the son of a grounds keeper. He wound up being adopted into the Tatsuki Clan.”

“Well, that's all well and good, but how would we go about sneaking her over to Jurai?”

Ayeka shook her head. “I suspect, Dear Brother, that would be a non-issue. If Tsunami wills it, little Yuki will not have to leave Earth for a tree to decide on her. And at that point, the issue would be forced upon us, for the tree that does decide to have her will choose none other, even if she were to die before the bonding ceremony could take place.”

I puffed a big sigh. “Great. So much for a simple life.”

“Don't be so hard on her, Dear Brother. She is just a child still. She will probably grow out of it. But, even if she doesn't, then with her level of dedication she will make a fine wife for you.”

“I get it, Sister... it's just... that sort of age difference is frowned upon in the culture I was brought up in. They even have a phrase for it: cradle robber.”

“I am sorry this causes you discomfort, Dear Brother, but you must understand that among us Juraians it is perfectly acceptable. In fact, if Yosho hadn't left to pursue Ryoko... I may have been married to him as young as fourteen years of age.”

“Alright,” I sighed. “But in order to maintain appearances here on Earth, I can't be affectionate with her... at least, no more than a family friend would be. And not even here in private. I don't mean

to say anyone here doesn't have my well being in mind, but as the old sayings go, the walls have ears, and loose lips sink ships.”

“Of course not. I wouldn't dream of forcing the matter with you and her. Just please try not to break her little heart, Dear Brother.”

Ryoko chuckled. “See, Ayeka? I told you he was a heartbreaker. First Minagi and now Yuki-chan.”

“Who is Minagi?” asked Yuki's voice as the quartet from earlier showed up again.

“Come on in and I'll tell you all about her,” I said. “Really, I think you and Minagi would get along well. She's such a sweet woman.”

Yuki reacted positively to what everyone had to say about Minagi. In fact, she even felt sad for her – having to leave me behind so she could find herself. She then went on to say that she couldn't wait to meet her future sister-wife.

Face, meet palm.

It was going on right in front of me, and even then I had a hard time believing that this girl was accepting the whole package deal. Maybe she was just wrapped up in the fairy-tale aspects of it all? In a way, I hope so. The only troublesome part about that would be the damage control over how embarrassed she'll be if she ever has a heel-face-turn moment.

I sighed as I turned all that over in my head while leaning back at my PC/Workstation – which I called Heater.

Heater was a real piece of work, even back when I had left my native timeline. It had one of AMD's latest Vishera 8-core CPU workhorses along with a pair of linked professional-grade Radeon GPUs and 64 gigabytes of memory to back it all up. This thing was a monster that excelled at handling 3D rendering projects and other heavy-duty number crunches. And that was exactly what I had been doing with the machine – with all its power, it rivaled the supercomputers of current time, so I would rent CPU time out to universities and the like that needed some serious processing.

Thus, broken body or not, I still had some data that Heater had finished processing to return – and another generous paycheck would be forthcoming afterward.

While I maintained an open-door policy on my C-Space, I rarely had issues with anyone sneaking in. Even Ryoko would directly seek me out the moment she crossed the threshold – something I was glad for because it meant she respected my wish for her to not use my C-Space to hide and dodge her chores. (Besides, she probably had much better hiding spots.)

So, I was quite surprised when I heard the familiar creaking of my loft bed.

“The hell?” I muttered to myself as I got up to see what that was. As heavy as he was, my cat, Rene still wasn't big enough to elicit a noise from the bed. Or maybe Ryo-Ohki was playing with Rene again? Boy, it had taken him a while to get used to the Cabbit and her unusual shape-changing ability.

I made my way down from the second level and into the common space, then over to my bed.

“I should have known,” I grumped as I cleared the ladder.

Yuki-chan. In pajamas. Hugging my pillow to her chest. Giving me a sheepish grin.

“Ah... I didn't want you to feel lonely tonight?” she tried.

“Limits,” I said succinctly. “They exist. And this is one of them. By the way, you only got away with the bath tonight because everyone else was there. Otherwise, that wouldn't have happened.”

“Pleeeeeeassse?” she wheedled.

“Sorry. No amount of cute is gonna budge me on this matter. Now c'mere, ya spoiled little princess.”

Yuki positively squealed in delight as she tried to get away from me, but I caught her by the ankle and dragged her over regardless. Soon enough, I had a squealing little girl hefted over my shoulder, and was knocking on the door to Ayeka and Sasami's room.

“Did you girls forget something?” I asked glibly as Ayeka opened the door. Both she and Sasami giggled at the sight of me with Yuki's legs kicking over my shoulder (“put-me-down-put-me-down...”) as I strode in and gently dumped the feisty little girl into the futon the Princesses had made for her earlier.

“Now, you stay here with my sisters. Okay, Yuki-chan?”

“No!” she declared petulantly.

“Yes, you spoiled little princess.”

Yuki stuck her tongue out at me and pulled down an eyelid with her pinky finger.

“Oh-ho-ho-ho! That's it, isn't it? I got your number now! You get just about anything you want back home, don't you? Even if you have to work for it a bit.”

Yuki harumphed cutely and turned her nose at me.

“Heh. You are adorable, even when you're angry.” Unable to resist, I pulled Yuki into one of my bone-crushing hugs that Sasami was so fond of. Yuki squeaked under the pressure. “Now stay here and sleep well, Yuki-chan.”

“Moouuuu,” Yuki moaned.

I smiled, then went to Sasami and gave her a good night hug, getting the usually happy grunt from her, and then Ayeka, too.

“OOOUUUFFFF!” cried Ayeka, not quite used to this sort of affectionate-older-brother treatment yet. “Brother!” she cried out, scandalized, but with a smile that belied her offense as she smacked my shoulder.

I just smiled as I left the girls to themselves. “Good night everyone.”

Before I went to sleep that night, I made an adjustment to my C-Space's security settings that if Yuki tried to get inside then she would be teleported straight to her futon in the Princesses' room. I was not surprised that morning to find that Yuki had triggered the security protocol no less than three times that night.

That adorable little imp would be the death of me if I wasn't careful.

It started out innocently enough. Just an idle curiosity I wanted to satisfy. And while the Internet was still relatively undeveloped from my perspective, it still had all the resources I needed for this. But even so, I did not think at the time that it would bring me to this.

“Washu-chan, I need a gene-mod.”

Washu gave me a flat look. “What.”

“I have an alternate here. I need a gene mod.”

Washu frowned at that. “Show me.”

It really was remarkable, how things could be so different, and yet stay so very much the same.

I only went back as far as four generations, and yet the differences were striking. For one thing, my alternate's mother's maiden name here was Delacroix. As before, her father's family were all transplants from Louisiana, but in my home time-line someone had gotten themselves into serious trouble with either The Law or The Mob and the entire family had to change their names and pull a fast fade.

Apparently, in this time-line, they went straight before being caught and got into the oil industry in Texas. While most Delacroix still persisted in that trade, Claude Delacroix opened several bars and restaurants, all with a unique Louisianian/Tex-Mex fusion that became all the rage, and eventually passed it all on to his son, Charles.

On the other side of my alternate's maternal line was the Saldanas. As before, the head of the family had been murdered for his wealth, but the old man had been more cagey this time. Not only had he stashed assets in Texas, but he had ensured that his fortune would remain with the family by relying on an American lawyer in the city of San Antonio – which even then was a budding commercial city.

Once the Saldana family saw that they were no longer safe in Mexico City, they simply liquidated their remaining assets and went to San Antonio to live a simpler, yet comfortable life.

Grandpa Joe still went to become a firefighter, only because he was that kind of man.

His daughter, Adelina, still met and married Charles. They still had three children.

Katherine still met and married a man named Wendell.

But here, things changed once more. Katherine and Wendell had more stable childhoods than they had in my timeline. They hadn't been as abused and damaged as before. They stayed together when things got tough... and my alternate had an amazing eight siblings! An even mix of brothers and sisters!

And Goddess, they loved each other so much! His Father was like the Sun, his Mother the Moon, and he himself was like a glorious morning star between them!

The alternate me even had a trust fund set aside by his mother's families – both the Delacroix and the Saldana loved their grandchildren very much, and there was no expense to be spared for their education. He was loved and looked up to by his younger brothers and sisters.

And he was already making plans to go to West Point.

He was going to be an officer in the US Navy and wanted to be a Nuclear Engineer.

I just about broke down and cried at how unfair life could be. Was this supposed to be punishment for how terrible I had been in my past life? To be shown what a difference in circumstances would make? To have life shove it in my face and say, “This could have been you! Sucks that you lost that lottery, eh?”

But once I pulled myself back together, I realized that it would be trouble if someone not of Earth noticed just how much I looked like an older version of my alternate. He would be going places – his face would be known, would be recorded in data. People whose undue attention I should not be attracting – that I may very well attract for the waves I've already made in this world.

“And so, Washu-chan, you see why I need a gene-mod now,” I finished at last.

Washu nodded without any further argument. “I'll do it. But nothing major. I know you feel horrible, Gar-kun, but that's not the kind of condition you need to be making major decisions in. I'll limit you to a different eye and hair color. Nothing more.”

“Alright then.”

For my hair, nothing as ostentatious as the fiery red I had talked about before. Instead, I went with a far subtler, but no-less striking jet-black that was commonplace among my Native-American ancestors.

My eyes, though... I always felt that my eyes were lacking in that they were too dark. And I had always liked how striking a vivid hue of blue was in a person's eyes. Not the storm-blue or the ice-blue some girls fawn over, but the hue that reminds you of looking into the deep blue sea.

I've been called an elf to my face before. I wondered what sort of reactions I would get now with this new look and this new intent to carve out my own life.

Life at the Masaki household was usually peaceful, but then things would happen, like incident with the wolf from the zoo. I came pretty damn close to killing that hunter – it was only the threat of counter charges for sexual harassment that kept them off our backs afterwards. As for the wolf, he and I came to be on fairly friendly terms. It probably helped that I beat the snot out of the rival pack's Alpha with my bokuto. Afterward, we saw plenty of each other whenever I went out on my longer runs. Sometimes I even brought Sasami and Yuki along.

Then the lovely Hiwa Takahashi came to stir things up. I had to admit, I found her utter confusion over me to be amusing, but there was also something just plain strange about how she would look at me – almost like as though I weren't really human.

Hiwa wasn't simply there to make trouble, though. She was there to see if she could entrust her childhood friend, Tenchi, to the other girls before she died.

Of course, Sasami and Tenchi weren't having any of that.

I sat in one of the trees overlooking the clearing that surrounded Ryoko's cave. I watched the antics of everyone below, apart as I ought to be for the moment. After all, I had played no real role in this, save as a curiosity for Hiwa herself.

“I know you are there, Tsunami-sama,” I spoke softly. “Don't you think it's about time we talked?”

She answered back as a whisper on the wind. *“You should know that if you want to talk to me then you should talk to Sasami instead.”*

“You and I both know better than that. While you may be aware of what Sasami sees and experiences, you are still two-sides of a coin. Can Sasami-chan honestly speak for you, the Choushin?”

There was a brief pause, filled only with the wind stirring the leaves and the faint noises of Ryoko bickering with Washu.

“The time for you and I to talk at length will come later, my child. For now, be content with confiding in my other half – after all, she loves her brother very dearly.”

The presence I felt in the air left and I knew I was alone once more.

With a sigh, I climbed back down to the clearing below. Ayeka would probably appreciate it if I lent my back to carry little Sasami back home.

I guess in a ways I couldn't blame Tsunami. Like I said once to Sasami, this was scary even for the Goddess herself – the knowledge I had could disrupt things so horribly. And all I had to do was tell them what Tenchi really was.

My days, lately, had taken on a bit of a routine.

Wake up at five in the morning and get something into my stomach along with Tenchi and Sasami – just enough to give our metabolisms the kick-start they needed – and then go up to the shrine for a short workout with Yosho. Note: unless otherwise stated, all transits through the forest are done with free-running.

Invigorated, I stop by and get a bit more breakfast and a hug from Sasami-chan, then hit the books with Yakagi's holocron. I'll either be working out some new bit of knowledge or work on a project in the smithy.

At around eleven, stop and check on Heater's latest number crunch and, if ready, send it off to it's original owner and cue up the next one. Go downstairs and have lunch with everyone else.

Afterwards, spend a couple of hours tending to my garden. Priority: spending time with Katherine.

Later, join Yosho and Tenchi at the shrine for lessons. Alternate between handing Tenchi his ass and he handing me mine. Get both ours handed to us on silver platters by Yosho.

Go back down to the house and help Sasami (and everyone else) with dinner. Banter and bond with my family, talk about what's been happening in general.

Of course, there were variations,

After spending a full month working at the Driving School and teaching Mihoshi enough that she was finally competent enough to get her license, I spent two days out of the week helping special cases that needed remedial education. My success rate was starting to make me legendary and Yuki's Grandfather was starting to joke that I should take over teaching English at her school. The salary wasn't half-bad either – I was starting to stockpile a tidy sum in my savings account.

On the days Yuki would visit, Yosho insisted that I be a proper sempai and take the brunt for instructing Yuki the basics of swordsmanship. There would also be a study session with a special focus on English – Yuki was getting pretty good at it, but given her dedication that came as no surprise. The rest of the time I spent hearing Yuki and Sasami giggling behind my back and dodging Yuki's tackles (to varying degrees of success – she was getting better at sneaking up on me, too).

Sasami had one night off a month for female reasons. Those days I'd take a little time out to pamper her (hot water pouches for cramps, special tea, and hugs) and we'd have American Dinner Night.

Of course, Ayeka would get somewhat pampered as well. However, she was also considered an adult by her cultural standards. Sasami wasn't, hence why she got the royal treatment. Besides, I made sure that Tenchi saw to that more often than I did. After all, she was his future wife, not mine.

Mihoshi didn't seem to have any sort of 'feminine issues'. It either never really bothered her or her alien physiology just handled it more gracefully.

Ryoko's was a non-issue. She could turn it on and off at will. And teasing Washu about menopause would only come up once we decided to have at each other. (Oh yeah. I am a rat bastard once the kid gloves come off. I once accused her of hysteria in the old-fashion sense, citing that it had been so long since she's gotten some – look at how she'd go after poor Tenchi-kun! Ryoko and Ayeka couldn't look Washu in the face without laughing for a week after that one.)

However, the biggest change to my routine came when I noticed that the girls had started watching the Mito Vice-Shogun TV Drama Series.

Tenchi saw me as I began to make my way to the deck with my Bluetooth speakers as well as my bokuto and shoto.

“Ah, is it that time already?” asked Tenchi apprehensively. The girls were already gathering in the den.

“Yup,” I replied cheerfully. “Wanna join me or weather the storm inside?”

“I think I'll join you this time, Gar-kun.” And with that, Tenchi ran upstairs to his room to get the Tenchi-ken and joined me out on the deck. I was already queuing up a playlist on my C-pod.

While the girls would watch their drama, I, and more often than not Tenchi too, would occupy ourselves outside on the deck. We could be doing any number of things – calisthenics, painting, composing haiku, cloud watching...

Today, it was swordplay.

A while ago I remembered that in Star Wars there was one or two characters known for being able to adjust the intensity of their lightsaber so they could make it relatively harmless – a perfect training aid – and I suggested to Yosho that maybe Tenchi should try doing the same thing with the Tenchi-ken.

Yosho thought it was a wonderful idea as it would be additional mental discipline to Tenchi's training and got him started on it right away.

Tenchi cursed me for this at first... until he finally got it right. And ever since, he's been using the Tenchi-ken for regular practice... and trying his damndest to kick my ass as revenge.

“Get over here!” Tenchi growled as I evaded yet another attack, spinning gracefully on the feet. “You damn monkey!”

“Hey, there's no tail here!” I cried out in mock-hurt as I added a physical reponse. “I'm an ape, dagnabsit.”

“Coulda fooled me,” Tenchi said as we circled each other for a moment. “Sure move like one!”

“At least call me a chimp, ya chump!”

I was just glad Yuki wasn't watching us now. She was actually watching the show with Sasami. On second thought, that actually kinda worried me even more because I found out recently she was putting me in certain roles in her imagination.

Suddenly, I heard Ryo-Ohki frantically meowing up at the sky.

TODAY WAS THE DAY!

“Hold on, Tenchi! We got incoming!” I said.

“Heh?” he replied and I pointed up at the sky. “What? Oh no! Not here!”

“Pondstrider, Tenchi,” I called out.

“What?” he said, giving me a terrified look.

I smiled back at him as I went to gather up my speaker. “It's gonna be okay this time. Though it might be for the best if we step inside.”

Tenchi disappeared into the house so quickly that he might have teleported. I just smiled and shook my head as I followed him in and shut the door.

“Hey everybody!” I called out, interrupting a playful spat between Ayeka and Ryoko. “We got visitors!” And not a moment too soon as the nose of *Mimisaka* smashed through the edge of the deck, sending splinters flying everywhere.

“Yaaaayyyyy!” cried out Sasami and Yuki together as they both ran for the deck outside. I chuckled at their enthusiasm and followed after them.

As we made it outside, followed by everyone else, the familiar sight of *Hinase* came sweeping down out of the heavens and gracefully poised itself over the water.

Minagi immediately appeared overhead, looking horrified at the sight of the damage.

“Oh dear,” I faintly heard her say. Suddenly, she locked her eyes onto me and I heard her suck in a breath of air just as she zipped in my direction arms held out to tackle me with an absolutely joyous look on her face.

“HHHEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE!!!! HHHEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE!!!!”

When Minagi sent us the letter through Mihoshi a few months ago, she had nothing special to say to me. At first I didn't really understand it – I knew that she was more than capable of making a separate, private holo-letter for me and me alone. But then, I began to suspect that she honestly didn't know what to say at the time. And seeing her now proved this.

I was glad that Washu had toughened me up, because that tackle would have busted every rib in my body.

“ohmygoddessImissedyousomuchmorethanIthoughtIwouldIdon'teverwanttoleaveyouagain!!!”

“minagi... air,” I croaked.

“OMIGOSH!” squeaked Minagi as she suddenly let go of me like I was a hot potato. She suddenly realized, though, that there was something different. “Gar-kun? Your eyes! Your hair! What did you do!?”

“Oh... Ah, bit of a story on that, but the short version is that I don't want my alternate here in this time-line to be mistaken for me.”

“Gar-kun?” came Yuki's voice as she approached cautiously. “Who is this?”

Minagi shot confused looks at Yuki and me, so I cleared my throat and said,
“Yuki-chan, this is Minagi, the woman I told you about. Mina-chan, this is Yuki Mihara... she...”

“I want to be his wife someday!” said Yuki excitedly. “Gar-kun has told me all about you! Oh you do look like Ryoko! Your eyes are so pretty! Oh we gotta get to know each other! If we're gonna be sister-wives, then I want to be your best friend ever!”

Minagi shot me an adorably shocked and confused face while Ayeka, Washu, Ryoko, and Sasami all nearly suffocated from trying not to laugh.

“Yeah,” I drawled. “It's been an interesting summer.”

While the others extracted little Lady Asahi from her ship, I sat down with Minagi and told her about all the events that led up to my meeting with Yuki and those that followed. Minagi was at a loss.

“But... is she really serious about this, Garrick? Does she really want to marry you?”

I sighed. “I'm holding out hope that she grows out of it, but that doesn't seem too likely at this point.”

Yuki turned her nose up and me, harumphing cutely. “I *am* here, you know!”

I gave Yuki a look. “Yes, we know, you spoiled little princess.”

Minagi giggled. Yuki harumphed. I sighed.

“Look, I'm gonna see what the others are up to. Why don't you two get to know each other?”

As I left them together I could already hear Yuki begin pelting Minagi with about a dozen questions a minute. I just hoped that she wouldn't have any hard feelings about that.

“So, how's sleeping beauty doing over here?” I asked as I approached the couch.

“She's just unconscious,” said Washu. “She should be coming around any minute now.”

I stood over the arm of the couch and looked down on the sleeping wood carver princess.

“She's beautiful,” I noted. “She was pretty cute in the manga, but seeing her now...”

Ayeka was about to say something, but then Asahi stirred, her eyes slowly starting to open.

“gohgei?” she murmured sleepily.

I smiled. “Sorry,” I said gently. “But I'm not your childhood friend.”

Her eyes opened wide and she bolted upright. “Who're you!?”

“Easy there,” I soothed. “My name is Garrick. You've landed at the Masaki household on colony world number 0315. We call it Planet Earth.”

“Zero-three-one-five? Isn't this a protected world!?”

“It is, but don't worry. We have some special residents here.” I then gestured over to the Princesses.

The teenage girl's face lit up in joy. “Big Sister Sasami! And Big Sister Ayeka!”

Ayeka and Sasami were a bit confused at first until Asahi told them who she was. The girl's home world of Ryuten was not only the source of Jurai's wood-carved starship hulls, but also a resort planet. Asahi, being something akin to a princess herself on her homeworld, wound up spending a great deal of time with our two princesses when they would visit Ryuten.

Of course, Sasami treated Asahi like a sister.

We then found out that recently, her father had been made the Master Sculptor by the old one as he lay on his deathbed. Of course, this meant that somebody else wasn't happy about the fact.

His rival had come to the planet with three strange men. Asahi's father had disappeared... and that rival, a man named Tatetsuki, had taken over as the Master Sculptor of Ryuten.

With her father accused of poisoning the old Master Sculptor, Asahi tried to flee Ryuten in search of help, but Tatetsuki had already blockaded all routes leading to Jurai.

And then she had run into Minagi, mistook her for Ryoko, and wound up coming to Earth.

With the way to Jurai closed, it was decided that the only way to handle the situation was in a direct fashion... and what better way than for everyone to role play a plot from Mito Vice-Shogun?

While everyone got all excited about making this whole thing into a Mito Vice-Shogun LARP, I pulled Tenchi aside.

“We got a problem here, Tenchi-kun,” I said as dragged him into my C-Space... and shut the door behind us.

“Yeah, no kidding,” Tenchi replied in exasperation.

I shot Tenchi a look. “The problem here, my brother, is you.”

Tenchi gave me a look that mingled shock, horror and anger. I couldn't have got a better reaction if I'd tried.

“WHAT?”

“Tenchi,” I said, sighing before I went on the rant. “Listen to me, Brother. You have a horrible habit of fading into the background whenever you can. Sometimes that can be a good thing – you know, letting someone else take the spotlight so they can gain recognition of their own.

“But lately, I've gotten plenty of my share of recognition. It's time that you stepped up to the plate and accept the mantle of Prince of Jurai. Besides, it's the only way you're going to get those girls to tone it down. Quit running, quit hiding, face up to them, and don't be afraid to fire back.

I then smiled. “It's not like they aren't tough enough to take a hit or two.”

“WHAT!?! But that's not-” Without warning I did a leg sweep and took Tenchi's legs out from under him.

“FIGURATIVELY you doofus!”

“Ow! What was that for!?”

“That was for you being an idiot. Now man up a little, get out there, and show those ladies who's in charge. You don't need to completely torpedo their plans. Just get them to cool it a bit, okay? They'll go along with it as long as you compromise some.”

“They'll really do it?”

“Of course they will, you goof. They love you, remember?”

At that point, Tenchi blinked and was silent for a brief moment as he processed that information.

“Oh!” he finally said.

As Tenchi proceeded to get the ducks in a row I began to load up Scooby with all my greatest big boy toys. Big rifles. Big shotties. Big hand cannons. Shaped charges. Flash bangs. EMPoppers. Noise makers. My collection of melee weapons. Portable storming field generator. Enough ammo to wage an insurgency. And the galaxy's biggest shorting-probe this side of Washu's Lab.

Honestly, I had considered staying. But I had been paying attention to Minagi when she tackled me. And when she said that she never wanted to leave me behind again, I believed her. So, since Minagi had an important role to fulfill, I would go along as well and help her.

“Whatcha doin'?” came the voice of the adorable Yuki Mihara. I turned and found her standing there in the middle of my shop floor, a smile on her face, but a stiffness in her posture...

I went over to her, took a knee down, and gave her a small smile.

“I gotta go help my family, Yuki-chan.”

“I want to come with you.”

I shook my head. “You shouldn't. Your life could... *will* be in great danger if you come with me.”

“But Sasami-chan is going!”

“Sasami-chan is a princess. There are plenty of people that would like to hurt her only because it would hurt the Royal Family of Jurai. From the moment she was conceived she has always been in danger, so she has been taught how to take care of herself. It is something she is very good at because her mother is in charge of the body guards that protects her father, the Emperor of Jurai.

“But you, my precious little Yuki-chan... you are a very sweet little girl from Earth. The worst thing you have ever had to face is a bully on the playground.”

“But I've been learning so much from you and Master Yoshō!” she cried out petulantly.

I am by no means whatsoever a heartless man. I am the farthest thing from it. And, Goddess help me, I do love Yuki very much. She is so vibrant and energetic, throwing herself into everything she does, giving it one-hundred-ten-percent, and flashing that big, beautiful smile of hers all the way. And I knew why she smiled like that, too. It was because she knew she was up and coming. She was on her way and nothing was going to keep her back.

I didn't want to take that smile away from her... but I had to, in order to make sure she could still smile again later on.

I went to the wall where I kept my practice weapons, retrieved a pair of shinai, then came back and handed one to Yuki.

“Show me first form,” I said tersely, slipping into sempai mode.

Yuki nodded her head resolutely and began to go through the motions. She knew all the basic forms already. She even knew the preferred counters for the moves that made up those forms. I moved in, attacking with such a counter, and disarmed Yuki with contemptuous ease.

“Again!” I snapped. “Second form this time.”

Yuki gave me a stricken look, but she grabbed her shinai quickly and began second form. Once more, I disarmed her with the basic counter.

“Third form!” I cracked. Tears were already starting to well up in her eyes, but I stood firm as she did. Another form, another counter, and the shinai clattered to the shop floor.

“Fourth!” I all but shouted. Yuki faltered, tears streaming from her eyes, but she still went for her shinai, still stubbornly moving through the exercise knowing full well what would happen.

As the shinai skittered across the concrete Yuki finally lost her composure completely and began bawling.

That sound cut through to my heart more effectively than Yakagi's sword had and in a heartbeat I had her wrapped up in my arms, clinging, shuddering, sobbing and crying as only a little girl that had her hopes dashed could.

“Why are you so mean?” she cried. “All I want is to be with you, (hic!) but you keep pushing me away!”

“I'm not trying to push you away. I just want you to be safe because I love you so much.”

There. It was out now. Yuki gasped softly and then pulled away so she could look up at me with those gorgeous brown eyes of hers...

...And she suddenly lunged at me and proceed to plant one firmly on my lips.

The little imp, hitting me when I'm weak like that – I couldn't even muster up the will to pull away from her. I even put my arms around her and let her finish.

After that, there really wasn't anything that could be said as we looked into each other's eyes.

Finally, I found my voice and told her gently, “For my sake, please wait here for me. I promise, no matter how long it takes, I will be back.”

“You really will?” she asked, sniffing.

“I will. But just remember that this changes nothing between us. You have to be content with that kiss until you're old enough.”

“Mou,” she sighed, crestfallen.

“Hey. You wait for me, I’ll wait for you.”

“Heh!? Really?”

“Of course. I think I finally fell for you just now... When I saw how hard you wanted to try. Even though you started crying, I could tell that you would still pick up that shinai and try again.” And that was the truth of it. Yuki had the sort of stubborn determination that would let her come through ten times out of ten no matter what she set her mind to. I couldn't help but find that more than a little attractive.

Yuki blushed, and then squeaked as I scooped her up and started heading out of the shop. “C'mon, let's get something to drink – I got some barley tea in my refrigerator.”

Soon enough, I had managed to get Yuki to settle down. I helped her wash her face, comb out her hair and put her hair bow back in. After a brief exchange with Minagi, I then went back to move Scooby.

“Are you ready on your end, Mina-chan?” I asked through my C-Pod's comms-app.

“Good to go, Gar-kun. You can open the gateway whenever you're ready.”

Nodding to myself, I replied, “Already, making the shift now.” I opened the holographic interface of my C-Space Manager, reset the coordinates for the external shop door, and executed the movement. The light over the massive roll-top door went red for a second, then went green again.

“Alright! Looks stable on this end, Gar-kun!”

With a smile on my face, I hit the remote for the door opener, and with Scooby on battery-mode only, I eased the diesel-electric truck from my shop in the C-Space and into the cargo hold on the *Hinase*.

“Alright!” I said cheerfully as I got out, powered down the truck, and then reset the location of the shop door to its default. “Once we tie this guy down we'll be good to go.”

“Great!” said Minagi happily. “Let's hurry, we don't wanna get left behind!” She then gave me the bedroom eyes. “Besides... you and I need to make up for lost time.”

I smiled back as I went for the tie down straps. “Yes ma'am.”

I don't know if Minagi and I had made up for six months of being apart, but we certainly gave it the old college try. (I use that turn of phrase intentionally. Bonus points to anyone that can make the connection.)

In the end, we wound up in her bed, sweaty and tired from our exertion, but dozing contently all the same. We had only a bed sheet pulled around us because anything more would have been downright uncomfortable – I tend to turn into a hot coal under bed covers and it has to be fairly cool before a comforter becomes... well, comfortable.

With a partner in the bed? Downright frigid.

I was idly stroking Minagi's head, contemplating the softness of her body against mine, how beautiful her cerulean hair looked up close, and the fact that she came back to me after being away so long.

I've always liked the saying about letting something go and waiting for it to come back – if it does, then it's yours, but if not, then it wasn't meant to be.

And it seemed that Minagi definitely wanted to belong to me.

I would have to talk to Seto, or perhaps Funaho, about how this would be set up. I know that in order for my adoption to go more smoothly I would probably be set up with someone else like Tenyo or Minaho. And of course, there would be the stipulation that this arranged wife would officially hold the position of First Wife. (Asuza was only able to get away with having Funaho as his First Wife because

his claim to the throne was already secured. That, and Misaki didn't care either way – for Funaho and Asuza's sake she would tell everyone else where to shove it and how far.)

Loathe as I am to admit it, this was of incredible importance because it sets up a pecking order. Each subsequent wife is, in truth, subordinate to the wife that precedes her, with the First Wife having the top spot. Any disputes among the family can work their way up the chain of command, as it were, and, if needs be, eventually be resolved by the First Wife.

Therefore, having one of the available women of the Royal Family be my First Wife would help ensure that most decisions about my household affairs would reflect the needs of the Royal Household. I didn't mind the idea too much because I knew that Seto would let me at least negotiate over who the lucky lady was to be. That, and I knew that Seto wanted me to shake things up, which meant sticking me with someone that would support my non-conformist attitude.

Which naturally brought me to wondering how Minagi would fit in. For one thing, I knew that Minagi was a free spirit. Despite the fact she loved having a family to be apart of, she actually relished being a black sheep and a lone wolf. On top of that, when confronting enemies she preferred to strike from the shadows – a left-hand approach if you will.

So, she probably wouldn't mind being a subordinate. In fact, she'd probably find interesting ways to turn that to her advantage.

There was only one question that really depended on how she felt: did she wish to be a concubine or have all the rights and privileges a marriage contract assured?

The sound of the door to Minagi's closet opening caught my attention, making me automatically raise my head and look to the source.

I have never been so surprised in my life.

She stood there, with a look of abject terror on her face – the only other time I had seen the look on her face was when a nameless thug in a ski mask held a military issue M9 Beretta to her head.

“I... I... I need to find the toilet,” she stammered.

“What are you doing here?” I said, absolutely horrified and at barely louder than a whisper but not out of any desire to keep Minagi from waking.

“Whah-huh?” said Minagi whoozily as she suddenly woke from her doze. “What is-” suddenly, her eyes found Yuki and Minagi sucked in a breath of air sharply.

“What are you doing here?” she said.

Yuki bolted for the exit.

Minagi waved her hand and the door shut, trapping Yuki inside with us as Minagi rose from her bed and strode over to Yuki with a glare on her face – not caring that she was mother-naked, not caring that just a few minutes ago she and I were making love...

Or rather, that was probably the point.

As I discreetly slipped my pants back on, I then realized that I should probably do something to help defuse the situation. I got up, went over to where Minagi was staring down Yuki. Yuki looked up at me, her eyes brimming with tears. I realized then it was very possible that she saw what we'd been doing earlier.

What a mess!

I sighed, and without any better ideas, picked up Yuki, went to the bed, and sat down with her on my lap, her chin over my shoulder as I rubbed her back. Minagi watched, her expression slowly softening, and she came over as well, sitting down next to Yuki and myself.

For a while, Yuki's breath hitched with barely controlled sobs. But after a few minutes she calmed down enough that I felt it was safe to ask her a few questions.

“You saw, didn't you?” I asked her gently.

“yes,” she whispered.

“Do you really think you're ready for that sort of thing?” I asked.

“I... I...” she stammered, trying to find an answer.

“If you can't answer immediately, then you are definitely not ready.” Yuki was silent again, but I could almost see the tears welling up in her eyes. “Yuki-chan... I am not angry that you saw us. That was an accident and there isn't anything you or I can do to change that now. But you understand now why I cannot treat you like I would Minagi, right?”

“...yes,” she whispered.

“I love you very much, Yuki. You are such a wonderful little lady. If only we had met six years from now...”

Yuki took a shuddering breath and let it go in a sigh. On a whim, I laid back on the bed, letting Yuki lay on my chest. Minagi laid down with us and looked into Yuki's eyes.

“Oh Yuki,” Minagi said at last. “I really wish you hadn't done this. You're going to be in so much danger now.”

“but... I want to help any way I can,” whispered the tiny lady.

“You're not strong enough,” I told her, not unkindly. “Not yet. I still need to protect you with these strong arms you love so much. But if you truly want that sort of strength for yourself... then I guess I have no choice. Rest for now, my tiny love. Tomorrow, you will enter hell.”

I waited until Yuki finally drifted off to sleep, and then, with Minagi's help, I alerted Yoshō to the situation. My older brother was perfectly understanding and said that he would let Yuki's family know. How he was going to spin this I had no clue, but I had faith in the Old Man.

Next, I called up Sasami on the *Mimisaka*.

“Hello Gar-nii-san!” said the adorable princess cheerfully. “Is everything okay over there?”

“Not as okay as I'd like, little sister. Tell me... you didn't put the idea into Yuki-chan's head to stow away, did you?” It was one of the few times I've ever seen Sasami genuinely horrified.

“Never!” cried out Sasami. “I know how dangerous this trip might be, Nii-san, so I would never have suggested it.”

I sighed. “Well, she's here regardless – she stowed away on Scooby.”

“Ohhhh nooooo,” moaned Sasami. “What are you going to do, Nii-san?”

“I'm going to train her, but I want your help in doing so.”

“Heeh!?! Me?”

I smiled at my little sister. “When confronted with an opponent you move like a ghost skating over water. And you have beautiful skill with a staff. Your mother taught you very well.”

Sasami sighed. “I guess I should have realized that Nii-san would know all about that. When do you want to start?”

“The day after tomorrow,” I said. “Tomorrow I'm going to start with her calisthenics.”

Minagi kept Yuki company through the night.

I worked.

It was not the first time I've done an all-niter. In fact, aside from the whole falling-over-your-feet-the-next-day thing, I'm rather partial to them. There are fewer distractions at night because hardly anyone is awake, and so you can work away the hours and make terrific progress on whatever your project is.

That night's project was a bit of a last-moment thing, but I at least had a very clear-cut idea of what I wanted to do.

First, there was the vest. The outer shell I fashioned out of cordura in an attractive shade of lavender. All around it were a myriad of small pockets. It was well padded, but not stiff, and lined absorbent cotton fabric. The other items followed the same theme – the bracers and leg protectors.

And then I went to the forge and started to make the weights. I made them as 500 gram and 1000 gram sizes. I made them out of tungsten alloy, so they were fairly small – you could fit several in each of the pockets.

And from this, you could see that I had meant it when I told Yuki that tomorrow she would be entering hell. If she wanted to be stronger, then by the Goddesses she was going to get it, and she would get it just like I did – lots of painful work.

“Yuki, wake up,” I called out softly, but with a firm and authoritative voice.

“hmrph...” Yuki mumbled sleepily, not even moving from where she had buried herself into Minagi's bust.

I sighed and climbed onto the bed and pulled Yuki away from Minagi. Oddly enough, Minagi stayed asleep. Yuki on the other hand...

“Muh... whah?” She then blinked up at me as I sat her upright on the bed. “Gar-kun? What is going on?”

“Your training starts today,” I said in a low tone. Yuki was confused at first, but I could see the gears in her head slowly catching speed as she began to remember everything that happened yesterday. I then went on, without any hint of levity, “This will be the first day of the rest of your life. Before long, anything before this day will feel like a distant dream. Now, sit still for a moment. You didn't bring any proper support clothing with you, so we'll need to improvise.”

Japan had no real nudity taboos, but that had slowly changed somewhat over the decades after World War II and the country's rather forced westernization. I was impressed when Yuki's only objection to me pulling her camisole off was to gasp and blush bright red.

I then reached into the satchel I had brought with me and pulled out an ace bandage roll and some bandage clips and went to work on binding her chest.

It might not have been needed, really. Yuki's breasts had barely begun to swell with her developing mammary glands – at the most she may need a training bra just to get used to wearing one. Therefore, all the more reason for her to become accustomed to this as soon as possible. Yuki would be spending many days honing her body, and her body would not wait around – she was already turning into a woman.

Yuki herself didn't even ask why – she was Japanese and they had a long history of women binding their chests. For the longest time, it was the only form of chest support the women of Japan could avail themselves of until Europeans introduced them to brassieres.

“In time, you'll need to learn to do this yourself,” I told her as I finished the wrap and secured it with a final bandage clip. I needn't explain why to her – she nodded her head, shyly, still blushing.

I gave her a querying look. “Why are you embarrassed?” I asked her. “Do you find your body distasteful?”

Yuki looked away. “I'm... not grown yet,” she said softly.

“Of course not. But that doesn't mean you are ugly by any stretch of the word, Yuki. Your body is a miraculous thing and you should treasure it.”

“How is it beautiful? It gets so smelly and some places...” she went ever redder this time. “...make disgusting things.” I sighed and took her left arm in one hand and placed my other hand on the corresponding shoulder.

“Do you know what this is, Yuki?”

“It's my shoulder?”

I shook my head. “It is an incredibly complex ball-and-socket joint. It allows for a range of movement that is seen in very few vertebrate life forms in the universe. You can swing the limb around in a full circle.” I then demonstrated by moving her arm around as such. “And you can even twist the joint through a one-hundred-eighty degree range.” I then bent her elbow and held her forearm parallel to the trunk of her body, then raised it and lowered it to demonstrate the twisting ability.

“A joint like this is fiendishly complex to an engineer. It is all sweeping and swooping curves and angles, and held together with a network of actuators and linkages. And despite all that complexity, it is something we take for granted because we have two of these incredible joints when we're born.

“But the most magnificent thing about the Human body, I think, is down here.” I place my hand gently over her pelvis, making sure not to go too far down. Yuki shot me a confused look and I smiled for the first time that morning.

“You should know, Yuki. Down here is your uterus. All girls have one, even before they are born. It is here that new life can be created. That is the most miraculous and beautiful thing about your body. Never think of it as something gross because one day it will give you a son or a daughter. Maybe even both.”

If Yuki was red before, she was positively glowing now.

I laughed softly. “Food for thought, isn't it?” I then let the smile go – as interesting of a bonding experience this was, there was much work to be done still. I reached into the satchel again and pulled out some of the clothes Yuki had brought with her. She spent so much time over at our house that she was even starting to keep changes of clothes there in case she and Sasami got into a mess. And she had brought them all over with her. The clothes that I handed her were the best ones suited to what we would be doing – a set of compression shorts (referred to as spats in Japan for some reason) she used for her training with Yoshō and a close-fitting undershirt.

“Here, change into these and do it quickly. We have a lot to do.”

Yuki was taken aback by the training wear I had made for her, but she accepted it once I explained it. She donned it and I then loaded her with weights – ten kilograms on her trunk, and two on each limb.

This would be brutal, but effective.

I then had her begin with basic warm-up stretches, and then a five minute run. She was already starting to breath hard. I let her rest for a minute and drink water, making sure she took small sips.

Then came the calisthenics. Everything I learned from practicing free running came into play here. The most important thing was to build her core muscles. There were a lot of awkward exercises involved for that. Fortunately, I had known a Pilates instructor who taught me exercises that, while useful for a man, were incredibly beneficial to women. The entire time, I performed the exercises with her. It may not have been a great effort on my part, but the idea was there – we're in this together.

Yuki will probably thank me once she realizes what I did. Especially once she has her first child.

I let her rest frequently and drink water. She was sweating plenty already and my intention wasn't to break her. She had plenty of energy, though that wouldn't last.

Minagi found us and I had Yuki begin a final five-minute run followed by cool-down stretches.

“How is she?” asked Minagi.

“She's trying very hard,” I answered back softly. “I think she may be more tired than she's letting on.”

“Do you still plan on doing more with her today?”

I nodded. “She's young. She recovers quickly. Besides, I'm hedging my bets.” I patted a small, pink thermos with a cartoon crab character on it.

“Something from Washu-chan? Garrick, what are you doing?”

“Nothing bad. Some nutrients, amino acids, sugars, electrolytes, and medical nanomachines designed to help her quickly recover from a workout. This will be the equivalent of two day's rest and recuperation. She won't even lose much of her adipose tissue and she'll put on healthy weight at the same time. Best of all? Tastes like a matcha milkshake. Halfway tempted to drink the damn thing myself.” Minagi giggled and nodded her head in approval. I then smiled and asked, “Are you willing to start passing your father's skills with the sword to her?”

“Yes,” Minagi answered without hesitation. “If she really wants to be my sister, then I would be ashamed if I didn't.”

I nodded. “I'm glad you feel that way. It would have been really awkward for there to be a rift between you two.”

“The only awkward thing is going to be how you and I can have intimate time with her in the equation. I don't want her to feel shut out.”

“We'll find it, here and there. Sasami will be teaching her tomorrow. I can have Washu-chan supervise to make sure they don't get up to something. Pretty sure she won't mind. Ah, Yuki's all done now. On to business.”

Yuki was still breathing heavily by the time I got to her. She looked winded, was covered in a sheen of sweat, and just plain rumped.

“Good job, Yuki-chan. Now for a bit of breakfast.” I then handed her the thermos.

Yuki eyed it, recognizing Washu's handiwork. “What is it?” she asked.

“It'll help you recover faster. Go on, drink it. Washu had me try a sample earlier – it's good.” And that was the only reason why I had so much energy after pulling an all-niter. Yuki frowned thoughtfully, then shrugged as she opened the thermos and took a tentative sip.

“HMM!” she cried out. “Matcha!”

“Whoah!” I cried out as she sudden went for it with gusto! “Slow down there or you'll get a stomach ache!” I was nonetheless smiling as I tried to slow her down.

Minagi, despite her loving and caring demeanor, turned out to be a harsh instructor.

Already having a foundation of basics to build off of, Minagi started right away by teaching Yuki the advanced forms that would soon lead up to the more advanced combat-drills.

My favorite was still the fast reflex drill – a veritable minefield bamboo stalks shorn at varying heights (between ten and fifteen centimeters) and a bamboo target suspended from a single line dangling from a high branch. The point was to get a good rhythm of attack going all while dancing around the obstacles and not getting hit by the target as it swung wildly all over the place.

Chaos incarnate – I loved the shit out of it. I even made a variant whose title aptly described the variation on the drill: floor lava. (This was how I built myself up to swinging my sword in the tree tops.)

Yosho was absolutely floored for not having thought of it before.

But for Yuki-chan... I winced and Minagi struck with her beam sword at Yuki's leg for being three centimeters out of position. It was powered down for training purposes, but I knew from our spars that it still stung like a suzumibachi. Judging by Yuki's reaction, though, it looked like she had it toned down even further, thank the Goddess.

Yuki was still a ways off from running the floor-lava drill. But if this kept up, it wouldn't be long until she got there.

By the end of the second calisthenics session, Yuki was rightfully exhausted.

"I feel gross," she said as she peeled off the exercise gear I had made for her.

"It's okay, Yuki. Your body is doing the best it can. Out of all the creatures on Earth, we Humans have the best temperature regulation."

"I still don't like the feeling of dry sweat." Yuki finally finished with the exercise gear and blinked. "Wow... I feel so light now!"

I smiled at her. "You see? And each day I am going to add five-hundred grams to each piece. By the time we get back home you are gonna leave everyone in the dust in PE."

"Maybe I'll try out for the track team," Yuki said with a smile. She then smelled herself and wrinkled her nose. "Ugh."

"Oh?" I asked as I then picked her up ("Hey! Put me down!") and smelled her ("What are you doing!"). "Eh. Smells like you worked hard today. Let's go ahead and get you cleaned up."

"That is so gross!" cried out Yuki.

"But I thought you like how I smelled," I said innocently (ya right).

"But... you don't stink... I mean... maybe a little... but it doesn't seem that bad..." I shook my head. I had not bathed since the day before and I was positively ripe by now. The thing is, us men actually do have pheromones. We just don't really notice their presence because we bath regularly, weakening their effectiveness to almost nothing. However, go a few days without a bath and see how your significant other reacts after the initial 'ew!' reflex. Women that say dirty men are their sexual kryptonite are just particularly susceptible to male pheromones... As seemed to be the case with Yuki. To top it all off, she'd been with me since the early morning, so she probably hasn't even noticed how bad I actually smell. Oh, and let's not forget puberty – the hormones were strong in this one.

In fact, she was even nuzzling my chest affectionately, much to my bemusement. Were she a cat she'd be purring by now.

Minagi gave us a bemused look. "Pheromones?" she asked right away.

"Probably," I answered. "C'mon, princess. Let's go get cleaned up before you start trying to rape me."

"HEEEHHH!?" cried out Yuki, shocked that I would make such an allusion.

That night, I scrubbed Yuki and Minagi's backs and we all soaked together. Bath time, as we know from before, is family time and bonding time in Japan. And since Minagi seemed to be receptive to the idea of us forming our own little family sub-unit among the Masaki Household, I decided to go along with it.

Though as a caveat to my sensibilities, I kept myself covered in the bath.

"I don't feel as bad as I thought I would," said Yuki as Minagi brushed out her hair.

"That's Washu-chan's restorative drinks I've had you drinking today. You pretty much recover completely within an hour. That way I can have you work out again and again. You'll progress a lot faster that way, but it's still going to take at least a few weeks of continuous effort until you're even close to my level."

"And then I can help out?" asked Yuki.

Minagi shook her head. "Gar-kun is actually the weakest one out of everyone."

Yuki shot Minagi a confused look. "But... he is always the first one to help everyone else when something goes wrong!"

Minagi smiled. "That is because Gar-kun cheats a lot. When things are going bad, he won't play by the enemy's rules. He'll change the game completely to suit his way of fighting." Minagi's smile then took on a more feral edge that made her resemble Ryoko in an uncanny way. "And then he punishes the bad guys."

Yuki giggled. "Because our Gar-kun is a champion of love and justice!"

"Oi, last I checked my name wasn't Tuxedo Kamen," I called out playfully.

Yuki hummed thoughtfully. "No, but I think you would look good in a tuxedo."

Minagi blinked. "What's a tuxedo?"

"Men's formal wear of Earth," I answered. "Trust me, if you ever saw me in one you'd probably start trying to peel it off of me." It would not be the first time a woman has eyed me like a particularly large Christmas present packed full of some delectable treat.

And at that, Yuki went blank-faced and glassy-eyed.

Minagi was quick to notice and poked Yuki in the face. This elicited no response. Minagi then gave me a blank look.

"I think you broke her."

Double-face-palm, go! "Uuuuuggggghhhh. Okay, no more sexual innuendo around her until she's old enough to handle it."

Minagi continued her family unit thing when it came time for bed. I acquiesced readily, provided we were all wearing pajamas.

It was an interesting experience.

I was tired enough to fall asleep with no trouble, even though I found myself sharing a bed with two girls, one of whom was underage. However, I did wake up a few times over the course of the night as Yuki adjusted. Once to her clinging to me. And again to find that she had switched over to Minagi. I found it amusing that she had once again buried her face in Minagi's bust. I began to wonder if she had other bisexual tendencies or this was just a holdover from her early childhood. Although, if she actually was bisexual, then it would help to know before it took us all by surprise and provoke misunderstandings. Particularly so if she didn't realize it herself.

We woke up the next morning and it was a repeat of yesterday, save for one small detail.

"Take your time with it and let yourself figure it out. It's not easy to do on your own when you're just learning."

Yuki was fussing with the ace bandage, trying to bind her own chest today.

"This is so hard," she grumbled. "Why do I have to do this?"

"Because your chest is starting to develop and it's best if you learn how to don and wear support clothing as early as possible."

"Can't you help me?"

"Not this time. This is part of your training. Besides, you should learn this as soon as possible so I don't need to help you later on. It's already an improper situation, even if you have every intention of marrying me."

"You could just have Minagi do this."

"I won't wake her for this. She's already helping me enough with your training. Besides, you are my responsibility. Not hers."

"But sister-wives are supposed to help each other, aren't they?"

"They are," I allowed. "But, far more importantly, you have gone and made yourself into *my* responsibility. You decided that I am the one to be your husband in the future. I have finally accepted this. And then you stowed away in my truck after I told you not to come. I can do nothing about that, except to do everything in my power to ensure that you are not only safe, but also that you can take care of yourself.

I sighed at this. "Really... I can't even say that this was a mistake on your part. That will ultimately be up to you to decide on. But know this, my tiny love: you have made an extremely adult decision – one that has extremely adult consequences. Your childhood, such as it was, is over now. It

is time for you to learn to not only fight for yourself as an adult, but also behave as one. This means learning to not rely on others as much as you used to, and accepting responsibility for your decisions.”

As I spoke, Yuki looked down as she bit her lip, her fumbling movements slowing to a halt. I know I'm being hard on her, but that's what you do with someone you love when they do something as monumental as this. I love her and I honestly wish she hadn't come... I wouldn't have to make her sad if she hadn't.

I only hoped that she would grow into a stronger, better person for this.

I sighed and went to Yuki, taking the bandage from her hands and mildly surprising her as she looked up at me with wide brown eyes.

“Here,” I said, as I put the end of the bandage to the middle of her trunk. “You start at the very bottom of your chest – where you feel the end of your sternum, your breast bone. Feel it?”

“Yes,” said Yuki meekly, her cheeks going red.

“Good. Now hold it with your weak hand... good. Now, take the bandage in your strong hand here,” I said, offering it to Yuki. She shyly took the bandage in her left hand. “Now, wrap it around twice in the same spot – firm, but not tight just yet.”

Yuki nodded and I spotted her as she went through the process clumsily, but she managed alright.

“Good. Now, while still holding the bit that's poking out here at the bottom, pull the rest tight. Just don't make it too tight – you want to be able to take deep breaths without any effort.”

She nodded again and pulled the slack that remained out of the binding.

“Good. Now you should be able to let go with your right hand and start binding the rest of your chest. Make three good wraps spiraling up, then three going down. Keep repeating that until you run out of bandage.”

Yuki went to work right away. As I thought, getting the binding started was the hardest part, but once she did everything else came easily.

In minutes, Yuki was fastening the bandage clips and eyeing her handiwork in the mirror.

“I look like a boy,” she said glumly.

“Gender does not matter when we are training. Even though there are times when special consideration must be given to women on the training floor, we are otherwise all men. Understood?”

Yuki frowned, but nodded anyhow.

We began our training once more – Yuki carrying three more kilograms of weights than she did yesterday. I felt that it was a modest enough increase, though after the first week or so I may have to cut back on how much I add. It all depends on Yuki herself and how quickly she is able to get stronger. With Washu's recovery shakes, who knew for certain?

One thing was for sure, Yuki was already feeling the burn as I made her go through her routine. However, there seemed to be a certain glow to her now. I recognized it – this was the same that she would exhibit during training with Yosho. She was hitting her stride and even though she was pushing herself, she was relishing it.

The weights may not be an issue after all, I thought to myself.

I suddenly realized that I would have to be careful about her. Yuki, it seemed, was a girl that liked to push boundaries wherever they may be, and especially if they stood between her and something she wanted.

I was ambivalent about this revelation. I found it desirable because she was obviously a woman that wasn't going to let something stand in her way when things needed to get done. However, she has already shown that she'll throw caution into the wind if she wants something badly enough. Like me for example.

This could be dangerous.

Someone once said that there is no such thing as good girls gone bad, just bad girls found out. I didn't really think Yuki was a bad girl, but with that sort of mindset a young woman could quickly turn amoral in the blink of an eye. I would have to find a way to keep her in check – discipline through physical exertion was obviously not doing it. (Least of all when they don't have the lingering effects, but unfortunately I needed her to become strong ASAP.)

Yuki and I slipped into the cool-down phase and soon she was sipping at her recovery shake.

And then Sasami arrived. What was interesting was that she was not wearing any of her usual at-home or even her traveling clothes. What she had on more resembled her night clothes, only made of sturdier fabrics. These appeared to be easy to move in, and tough enough to get tumbled and rolled around in without ripping or wearing down too easily.

“SASAMI-CHAN!” cried out Yuki happily as she went charging for her best friend.

I saw it coming just before it happened. She looked at Yuki with an expression that combined sorrow with wrath. I inwardly winced. *Oh man, this is gonna be bad!*

Crack! Sasami remained posed in the follow through for a moment while Yuki was left with her head turned by the force the the slap, a stunned expression on her face as a reddening mark appeared on her cheek.

“sasami... chan...” Yuki murmured in shock, completely BSOD'd by the unexpected act of violence on her person by her best friend and confidant.

“You lied to me,” Sasami said quietly.

OH. FUCK. It took all my restraint not to say that out loud.

“You said you would stay at home,” she said, tears beginning to stream from her eyes despite the angry expression on her face. “You promised it so I wouldn't warn Nii-san. But now I see you only made that promise so I wouldn't say anything.”

“Bu-But Sasami-”

“No!” snapped Sasami angrily, tears still streaming from her face. “You broke a promise to me! You embarrassed me, you embarrassed Nii-san, and you've even embarrassed your family! All because you wanted to be with him.”

“Sasami-chan, I'm so sorry, I didn't think you really meant it this much. But I understand now-”

“You don't,” Sasami said sadly. “You honestly don't. And you won't until you finally see what real danger looks like. But that is why Nii-san asked me to come here. He wants me to teach you how to protect yourself. Yuki-chan... I am sorry, but you are going to hate me for what I am going to put you through.”

And then, to my surprise, Sasami pulled out both of her pig tails, letting her long cerulean hair out into a single, beautiful blue fall that went clear to her ankles. The two hair ties suddenly metamorphosed in her hands into long staffs – the spherical ornaments becoming nobs on the end of each one. She handed one to Yuki.

“You will use one of mine until Washu makes one for you.”

Yuki accepted the staff. “I won't hate you. I never could. I am sorry I broke my promise, Sasami-chan. What can I do to make up for it?”

“Start by surviving,” Sasami said, her voice cold and her eyes sad.

I thought Minagi had been tough on Yuki. I was dead wrong.

Sasami was brutal. Relentless. Cold. She demanded absolute perfection of Yuki's technique. Nothing else mattered. If Yuki moved too fast, Sasami struck. If Yuki moved with too much power then Sasami would strike. If Yuki was just a hair out of place, Sasami would land a painful blow.

The movements Sasami was teaching were not complicated. They were very basic and similar to the sort of movements ballet dancers would learn. But time was not an ally. Yuki didn't have years to perfect her technique. She had weeks, if even that. Therefore, Sasami focused on pure perfection of the technique.

I could see it in her eyes that it hurt Sasami tremendously to do this to her friend. Every strike, every sharp word, every glare had those sad eyes. It was something I could sympathize with and I resolved to spend some time consoling her later on.

However, I saw a strange transformation overcome Yuki. She would not complain. She would wince at the strikes, and right away she would try again. There was fire in her eyes, no mistake about that.

Yuki was growing up, and she was going to become an absolutely breathtaking woman. The Juraians would not know what hit them by the time we got done with her.

Minagi took over after Sasami pronounced the lesson to be over. While I went with Sasami to the *Mimisaka* to talk with her and help prepare the evening meal, Minagi would give Yuki her swordsmanship lessons and start on her evening callisthenics routine.

"How do you think she's doing," I asked Sasami as we cut vegetables together.

"She has potential to be great," Sasami replied. "But I'll need at least a few weeks with her before she gets real good. Otherwise, she'll need someone to watch after her."

I nodded my head at that. "How are you doing?"

Sasami paused for a moment, but then continued cutting. For a long moment, she said nothing.

"I don't know what to say, Nii-san. I love her like a sister. But she made a promise and broke it, and I'm so angry at her, but I still love her. And worse is that she's not even getting angry at me for hitting her during training! It's like she wants this!"

I sighed. "I know. I know. Sasami-chan, this is tough, but these feelings are natural when you have someone that you love make a big mistake and the only way to fix things is to make it real hard on them for a while. And you're angry and you want them to hurt, but it just hurts you instead and it's confusing as all hell. Believe me, I know."

"But... what about her?" she asked.

I sighed once again. "I've seen her type before, Sasami-chan... Yuki... doesn't want to be a child anymore. She's done with it. She will do everything she can so she can be taken seriously as an adult, because that is all she wants. What's worse is that she probably understands what that means. She is taking the express lane on the road to adulthood, and she is not looking back.

"You saw it in her eyes, didn't you? The fire she had in them."

Sasami nodded. "It was scary and sad... Nii-san... will she be okay?"

"She probably will. She's just going to be annoyed that her body won't grow up as quickly as her mind is. Which reminds me..."

"What is it, Nii-san?" asked Sasami nervously as I leveled a glare at her.

"No more of you and Yuki sneaking Uncle Noboyuki's doujinshi when we get back home!"

Sasami bowed her head in defeat and Ryoko called out "BUS~TIIIIID!" from across the kitchen. Poor Ayeka was completely flabbergasted by the sudden revelation.

Mihoshi giggled. "Oooh! Sasami-chan's been a naughty girl!"

Washu just smiled and shook her head, muttering, "Kids..."

Ryo-ohki was too busy munching on a carrot to notice.

I came back to the Hinase bearing two bento boxes packed full of food that Sasami had cooked. Minagi was already finishing Yuki's cool-down for her second calisthenics routine of the day.

Yuki was bone-tired, but seemed happy about what she was doing.

She was like those few and rare recruits you get in boot camp... the ones that will eat up every little bit of punishment you throw their way because honestly, in their heart-of-hearts, they want to be there and they want to succeed and do not care how far they have to push themselves to get there.

Even though I remained largely silent about it, it would not cease to amaze me. Yuki was certainly not afraid of hard work. An interesting thing coming from a girl that got whatever she wanted.

Or perhaps I was reading this the wrong way? Yuki had been held at gun-point before, albeit briefly. That kind of thing does tend to have repercussions on a child's psychology. Was Yuki's desire to no longer be weak born out of a fear of being helpless? It certainly was not an unreasonable thing. And if we really weren't taking her desire to be stronger seriously enough, then I could see how it would push her to this point.

But the only person that could tell us for sure would be Yuki herself. And right now was not the time for pop-psychobabble. Her training came first and foremost.

A week goes by and I did not make things any easier on Yuki. I added mental disciplines to her routine... but at the very least I made them fun. I began with puzzle games like Bejeweled and Hexic as well as a real brain-squeezer in the form of Brain Age. I also had copies of her homework transmitted from Earth so she wouldn't fall behind on her classes.

Physically, she was starting to progress at a phenomenal rate. During calisthenics Yuki would grind away with over fifty kilograms hanging off her petite frame. For her swordsmanship and staff lessons, the weights came off so she wouldn't be thrown off by their absence if she got into trouble.

Minagi was impressed as was Sasami. It still hurt Sasami to do what she was doing to Yuki, but she bore it well – much like a person with an infected wound and is resigned to cleaning the wound daily.

By the end of that week, though, *Mimisaka* was forced to land on Yatsuka. A planet rich in mineral wealth, it was located halfway between Earth and Ryuten, and therefore well within the confines of the Empire of Jurai.

I had my own ideas about how to handle the situation.

“So,” said Seto with a cat-that-ate-the-canary smile, “in order to maximize the evidence we'll have against Lord Ohsa, you'll have Minagi make recordings of everything that happens, as well as steal a copy of his hidden ledger. Meanwhile, Tenchi and his group will distract him by playing as a group of unwitting travelers, and you, my devious little grandson, will go raise merry hell performing hit-and-run raids against his guards.

“As much as I love this plot of yours, Grandson, I do wonder why go through so much trouble for just a little more evidence.”

“Because, Grandmother, as an American by birth, I find tyrants to be utterly disgusting and reprehensible worms that aren't even worth target practice. They should all be bled out like pigs at the slaughter.”

Seto gave me an approving smile. “Well spoken my darling grandson. You will indeed make an excellent addition to the family.” Seto's smile took on a slightly more devious edge. “Just be careful or else you may earn the title 'Devil Spawn of Jurai'.”

I grinned back at her – here was a woman after my own heart. “No offense, Grandmother, but I will always be a man of Earth. Devil Spawn of Terra has a better ring to it, I think.”

Seto laughed. “Indeed! By the way, I heard from my little Sasami-chan that you have a bit of an issue with the name of Yuki Mihara. Is she available by perchance?”

I nodded. “Yuki, you may come over now.”

Yuki stepped into the field of the communication's visual pick up.

“Oh my!” Seto said with a gentle smile. “Why, you remind me of Funaho... only so much younger than when Asuza brought her home. My granddaughter tells me that you're in trouble, little one. Now, I've heard the story from her side, but I would like to hear it from you now. What did you do, little Yuki-chan?”

“I... I sneaked onto Minagi's ship. And I broke my promise with Sasami-chan. I know that both things were very wrong. I really do. But... I don't want to be treated like a child anymore, Seto-sama. I want to be strong like everyone else is. I don't want people telling me what to do... except maybe Gar-kun... because... I really do love him.”

Seto nodded. “And tell me... why exactly did you do what you did?”

“I... I wanted to prove that I can be strong... and I wanted to be with Gar-kun.”

“Hmm... Grandson, what are your thoughts on the matter?”

“She has potential, Grandmother, but physically, Yuki-chan is still a child, no matter how quickly she desires to be grown up. She may earn as much respect as she wants, but it will take time to cultivate, especially considering her betrayal of Sasami-chan. She's quite impatient in that regard. However, I must add that she is a remarkably hard worker. Once she sets her sights on a goal, she does not give up and she gives it everything she has.

“Also, I must admit that I've grown fond of her. She's a very sweet and loving girl despite her stubborn determination. She wants to be best friends with Minagi and already thinks of her as a sister.”

Seto chuckled. “That is something else we'll need to discuss. You, my Grandson, are a shameless thief, stealing the hearts of all these women.”

I rolled my eyes. “I wouldn't say shameless.”

Seto laughed again. “As for you, Yuki-chan... Garrick, when all this business is over with, I would like to interview Yuki-chan and Minagi-chan in person. Please have Ayeka bring them and yourself to Jurai. I feel that we will soon be able to resolve your adoption and it will be best if you are here for it.”

“Of course, Grandmother. I look forward to my first time on Jurai. Just don't sic too many nubile young bachelorettes on me.”

Seto laughed uproariously at that before she cut the channel with a wink and a smile.

“Would... would she really do that?” asked Yuki nervously.

“In a heartbeat,” I answered. “But don't worry, Yuki-chan. They'll never know what hit them. Because I am Garrick Grimm.”

Touchdown was uneventful. I unpacked all of the weaponry from Scooby, knowing that we wouldn't need them right away. I went only with a Calico-replica of the M300 chambered for Forty-Caliber S&W Magnums with solid steel penetrators. The cartridge itself may not be the best man-stopper out there, but fifty rounds of semi-auto armor piercing firepower is hard to argue against.

With Scooby emptied, I deployed the bed seats, activated the camper shell's AC unit, and had everyone load up. Of course, Washu and Asahi stayed behind to make repairs, and Minagi went to scout ahead, so there was plenty of room for everyone.

“It's beautiful out here,” I said at one point where we stopped at the edge of a bluff that overlooked the valley.

“There's nothing out here, Dear Brother!” said Ayeka in shock. “How can you say it is beautiful?”

I looked to my sister and smiled. “It's a desolate sort of beauty. Empty, yet serene. Look out there, My Sister. The wind blows across this dusty land, slowly shaping it over time. If you were to come back here near the end of your life, it will have changed completely as the wind has etched new

formations into the sandy stone. And the night sky here would be beautiful. With no light pollution and very little moisture in the air, the stars would shine here like as though you were standing on the hull of a starship. It is utterly breathtaking.

“It's a good place to find your inner peace.”

I turned to look at the others and found them all looking at me in awe.

I smiled and then tapped my C-pod, bringing it up to my face. “Minagi, how far are we from that trail you found?”

“It's about three kilometers to the south of you,” came Minagi's voice over the link. “Once you reach it, bear east and that should bring you to the village.”

Scooby had traction control that rivaled the finest four-wheel drives out there, thanks in no small part to the traction control computers in each of the four direct-drive wheel motors. Calculating the exact amount of torque needed for the acceleration that was demanded on the terrain at hand every hundredth of a second, Scooby would move quickly and quietly over the rugged land, not one erg of energy wasted on needless wheel spin.

With this, I negotiated the terrain readily and found the trail easily. From there, I was able to take the diesel-electric truck up to something like highway speeds and we reached the village in minutes as opposed to hours.

And as I had expected, the village was like a ghost town.

Once we had set to calling around, a man did appear – a large and broadly built, handsome man with black hair and skin just a shade darker than Mihoshi's.

“Who are you people? Where did you come from?”

“We're just some travelers passing through,” I said peaceably. “Our ship broke down and while our friends make repairs we came to see if we can restock our provisions. We have plenty of money if you trade on the Royal Credit, or we can even barter if you like.”

“Provisions?” creaked an ancient sounding voice from one of the hollows. An equally ancient woman emerged. Her skin was as dark as the man's, and her hair was white as snow. She was small statured – something that wasn't helped by her slightly stooped posture. Mihoshi cried out thinking she was seeing a ghoul at first. I knew better, though. I could see, deep inside the weathered face, that this had been a beautiful woman once.

“You folks're too late fer t'day. Market's only open in tha mornings during shift change a'tha mines. Not th'there's many people left to actually buy anything. Well, c'mon in. You folks might as well git comfortable. Git's colder an'a witch's back side out 'ere at night.”

“But mother! One of them's armed!” cried out the man.

“Now don'tchu start tha malarky there, boy!” snapped the elder woman. “Would you go out into tha wilderness out there withou'a weapon? Boy's got a good head on them shoulders o'his fer packin' heat. Give 'im an edge ifin' 'ee ever run inter trouble 'round here!”

“If it makes the man of the house more amenable, I'll gladly disarm,” I said.

“Y'see?” creaked the old woman. “Well mannered, too, knowing it ain't polite goin' inta 'nuther person's home wi'a loaded gun. Could learn sumthin from the whippersnapper. C'mon in, y'all. Ye can jus' leave tha gun on thar table. Jus' ma son-in-law and mah girl inside.”

“Hot damn,” I said with a grin as I removed the magazine from my Calico and made sure the chamber was clear. “Feels almost like home here.”

“You mean there's people like her where you come from?” asked Yuki.

I grinned down at the girl as I set the weapon and magazine on the table. “Yep. She's what we call the mother of the household. Even though she's not really in charge of things anymore, she'll make damn sure people do as they're told and behave like proper men and women. Can't be tarnishing the

family name with any poor manners. And they will especially pick on the son- or daughter-in-law because they'd be the most likely ones to screw up some form of family etiquette. Not too different from what you have in Japan, but with a flavor I'm more familiar with.”

“I think,” said a lovely little soprano voice, though stressed and strained, “it's time.”

All of us looked and there, leaning in one of the doorways was a woman. She would be petite and dainty if not for the burgeoning pregnancy that was resting in her pelvis. Otherwise she would have been the perfect picture of a Svartelf. But more importantly was the fluid between her legs, staining her clothes.

Before I knew it, I was across the room and had one of her arms over my shoulder and her husband was on the other side.

“This way,” said the elder woman guiding us to a bedroom where we gently laid the belabored woman down.

“Who are you?” she asked.

“We're travelers,” I answered. “Fortunately, I know how to handle this sort of situation. Oldest of seven children. May I ask a personal favor, though?”

“What?”

“The two youngest girls... they're coming up on marriageable age and they need to know what the pain of a mother is. Would any of you mind if they watched?”

The mother to be smiled and shook her head. “I was no older when I saw my cousin's birth. It would honor me.”

“You have my gratitude,” I said as I bowed. I then turned to the elder. “I'll go make sure my family is making themselves useful.”

As I turned and left the bedroom, I heard the crone muttering, “Smart whippersnapper.”

“Sasami! Yuki!”

“Yes Nii-san?”

“Yes Gar-kun?”

“You two go inside the bedroom there and do exactly as Grandmother tells you.”

“Yes Nii-san/Gar-kun,” came the synchronized reply, and the two girls took off at a barely restrained gallop.

I then looked to Tenchi. “Brother, we'll need a fire going for hot water.”

“Got it!” Tenchi replied and made a beeline for the hearth.

“Ryoko, Ayeka, Mihoshi? We'll need every clean blanket and towel in this home. Bring them to the bedroom, quietly, and place them wherever the Grandmother wants them to be.”

“Got it!”

“Right!”

“As you wish!”

Once everyone else was busy, I went to get the water. A few minutes of searching led me to find a suitable pot and a water cistern. Pot filled, I went to set it by the hearth and began to help Tenchi with the fire. Before long we had one roaring inside the oven with enough logs to settle into a proper cooking fire.

“You knew about this?” asked Tenchi.

“Yeah,” I replied.

“Anything else I need to know about?”

“Guardsmen are gonna show up eventually. They'll be looking for the off-worlders that breached their pathetically non-existent planetary shields – damn thing is only good enough to keep smaller space rocks out.

“I'll go on the run to distract the guards, but you need to surrender nice and quiet like. Tell Ayeka to take care of Yuki for me – she'll be safer with her than with you or me.”

“What about you?” Tenchi asked.

I smiled. “I can take care of myself. Besides, Minagi's scouted the terrain and she's been uploading maps and intel reports to my C-Pod. I'll be fine. You just make sure that Ryoko doesn't do anything too rash, and maintain the charade we got going.

“Aside from this moment, this is where you should be taking charge, my Brother.”

Tenchi sighed. “Of course.”

In what must have been record time for a new mother, the infant was born with both mother and child happy and healthy. While the others all enjoyed drinks together and Sasami gently played with the newborn, Yuki watched quietly from the sidelines.

“Penny for your thoughts,” I asked her.

“That was scary looking.”

“It is,” I agreed. “But then, when you decide to have a child you would be on the opposite end, so it's not like you'd have to watch.”

Yuki watched Sasami play with the infant. “The mother looks happy.”

I nodded. “She's fortunate. First time child births are usually difficult things. She knows this. But most of all, she's happy about finally having a child.”

“That's the part I like,” she said. “After all that hard work... getting to hold the baby...”

“It's more than that, though,” I told her. “Over there at the table is the man she loves. She loves him enough that she offered up her womb for him to plant his seed in. From that seed, she nurtured a new life within her for however many months it took. She felt the child's first movements within her, felt it grow, getting stronger every day... until today. And with great effort, she brought the child out into this world. Her child. And his child. A new life with a little bit of them both mixed together.”

We were silent for a moment and I went on, “You're not ready for it yet... but you want it someday, right?”

Yuki nodded next to me. “Some day...”

“Good,” I said as I gently scruffed her hair, earning a raspberry from her. I smiled back at her. “Stay with Ayeka. And don't forget... being strong isn't just the ability to defeat an enemy... it is also the ability to endure any hardship, just like that woman did over there.”

“I won't forget.” I smiled as I got up and made my way outside.

I was not disappointed.

“Halt in the name of Lord Ohsa!” cried out the leader of the guardsman with the high-collared shirts. They all had staffs.

I didn't stop walking. In fact, I grinned as I walked right into the leader's range of attack without slowing down or hesitating.

He, on the other hand, did, and it cost him dearly. With a deft grab and squeeze of his hand I relieved him of his staff, taking it in my own hands. He went down quickly as I brought it down over his head.

I then tossed the weapon aside.

You see, the funny thing about staffs... you get someone that really knows how to apply leverage – someone like me – and suddenly your fight becomes a thousand times more difficult because the only way to really hurt your opponent is to keep them at the extreme boundary of your attacking range. And those strikes can be easily avoided. Especially by a traceur like myself.

The second guardsman I mowed down like he wasn't even there. I just ducked his first swing, pushed his staff aside, dragged him down by his collar (which was actually some kind of plate armor, go figure) and punched his lights out.

The other four guards were now looking at me with terrified expressions. I simply walked by them, totally unchallenged, got into Scooby and drove off.

“Minagi,” I called after activating the comm link. “They should be rounding up Tenchi's group now. How are you?”

“I got a good overwatch position. That was incredible, by the way.”

“Simple psychological warfare. Take down the leader and make it look easy, the others will be cowed. They'll be happy with Tenchi and the others not putting up a fight.”

“Aaaaannnd... Yup, you're right. No trouble at all.”

“Great! I'll fire up my storming field then head back to *Hinase* and arm up, then start raiding the guard posts. Wish me luck.”

“Happy hunting, Gar-kun!” I then grinned as right before the line was closed completely, I heard Minagi cry out, “EEEEEEEEEE! HE'S SO COOL!!!”

Late the next morning.

The sun was already high in the sky and I was laying prone on a dusty outcropping. By this time, Tenchi and Ryoko will have been working in the mines for a few hours, and that cancer, Lord Ohsa, will have started his all-day private party with the rest of the girls. Which meant it was time to do my job:

Making these fuckers bleed.

I noted that the change of the guard was commencing. That was my cue. I got up, went to Scooby, and got one of my favorite toys out. It resembled your average Mosberg 500 only with a much larger bore and a magazine in front of the trigger.

My favorite weapon system in the Navy, right after the Mk45 5"/54 Calibers Lightweight Gun Mount was the Mk19 40mm Machine Gun. It was only because it puts a whole lot of high-explosives downrange in an almighty hurry, and in a fashion that any enemy will find difficult to deal with.

My new toy didn't deliver the hurt quite as fast. It still used the 40mm cartridge we all know and love, but it was magazine fed rather than belt fed. Also, it was semi-auto instead of full auto. But the advantage was that it could be carried and fired by one man.

In my head I like to call it, quite poetically, The End of the Quiet Day.

I shouldered the weapon, took aim, and began to empty the magazine. The weapon was quiet enough that it didn't need a silencer. So once the rounds began landing they had no idea where they were coming from.

Under fire, no warning, no sign of an enemy. Was it cowardly? Perhaps. But I knew these men were scum. They were all loyal to Lord Ohsa, otherwise they would be the ones working in the mine. As far as I was concerned, they deserved neither mercy nor respect.

I only went through two magazines and that was it. The guardsmen were in shambles. Some weren't moving, others would not be moving for long. Their screams reached up to me clearly and I still felt no remorse.

The End of the Quiet Day. It lives up to its name.

Satisfied, I went to Scooby, got in, and drove to the next raid point. I had a busy day ahead of me, and it was going to be tiresome to keep them off my back, even with the portable storming field.

Later that afternoon, I had hit a total of five check points – two of them twice. I could tell by their demeanor that the guardsmen were nervous. There numbers were also starting to look a bit scarce.

Just out of curiosity, I pinged Minagi with my C-Pod.

To my pleasant surprise, she answered back.

“Everything okay, Gar-kun?” she asked, a hint of concern in her voice.

“Peachy-keen, my dearest Minagi-chan. How are things on the inside?”

I could hear the smile in Minagi's voice. “Whatever you're doing, keep it up. These guys have no idea what's been hitting them and it's freaking them out. Best of all, it's just as you suspected – Lord Ohsa does not wish to be disturbed for anything while he's in his little play room.”

“Good. Is Yuki doing alright?”

“She is, but... Ohsa has been giving her funny looks. I don't like it. He's got her made up like one of those maiko girls, only without the face paint.”

I frowned at that. “Ayeka may have to move sooner than we originally planned for Yuki's safety. Stay on top of it, okay?”

“We got it, Gar-kun. You just keep yourself in one piece. We'll send the signal once we're ready.”

By the time they sent me the signal early the following morning, I had already completed eight more raids. Ohsa's guard was now virtually non-existent. I could only imagine the look on his face when he finally realized what was happening – that the short, brief assaults on his guard posts were really whittling away his manpower at an alarming rate and that he was honestly under a genuine assault.

(Actually, I didn't have to imagine for long. Minagi showed me pictures. The look on his face will remain one of my treasured memories forever.)

When the signal came, I triggered a series of claymores I had planted on the other side of the palace complex – the one opposite of where Ayeka and her group would meet me. The alarms went up and the guardsmen began streaming to the sight.

I only had two guardsmen to take care of at the main gate. Soon enough, the girls had shown up.

“Ladies!” I called out. “Your chariot awaits!”

“Yay!” called out Mihoshi. “Nii-san saves the day!”

“Yeah, Gar-nii is so cool!” replied Sasami.

“Eh. I just cut down on their numbers. It was no big deal. They were so incompetent – they didn't even bother sending trackers out to find me.”

“I don't think they ever really needed any, Dear Brother,” said Ayeka as I helped her up into Scooby's cab. “With this environment... they don't even need walls.”

Last one in was Yuki. Of course, the moment I turned to her she jumped up and grabbed me. Oddly enough, she was still wearing the outfit that Ohsa made her wear.

“Hey there. Did you lose your other clothes?”

Yuki shook her head. “I didn't like that he made me wear this in front of him... But I like it... I want to wear it for you.”

I blinked at her, then put her in the small seat between Ayeka's and mine, then got in.

“Yuki-chan?” I asked once we got under way.

“Yes?”

“You do know what that clothing represents, right?”

“Unh. These are the clothes of the dancer girl. She is supposed to be pretty and entertain guests. But the only person I want to entertain is Gar-kun.”

I frowned. This was a new twist. “Yuki-chan, that is not how I see you.”

“I know. I will learn to do all kinds of things. I'll learn how to fight, I'll learn math and science... someday, I want to be a botanist. I think it will be pretty interesting to learn about all the different plants in the Galaxy and what they do. But someday... I want to entertain my husband. Because that's what a wife should do.”

Radical feminists would have a field day with this one. Honestly, I didn't think it was a bad thing for a woman to want to please her husband in the bedroom, but it boggled my mind that Yuki was thinking ahead like that.

“There will be plenty of time for you to learn those kinds of things later.”

“Ah, Dear Brother,” said Ayeka, using Old High Juraian. “How long has she been like this?”

I replied in kind. “Since the first day, Dear Sister, although not as intense. Lately, though... She has been getting worse. She caught Minagi and I making pictures of spring unaware of her presence.”

“Oh my...” replied Ayeka as she turned positively fligid. “And now she... has become frustrated?”

“Indeed.”

“In that case... is it really wise for you to spend so much time with her?”

I shrugged. “I have no idea what else to do. She must be trained to protect herself. And I cannot in good conscience foist her off onto someone else, except where I know she'll be in grave danger at my side. She came for me, has sworn and declared to devote herself to me... So I am responsible for her. No one else.”

“Are you certain that our younger sister had nothing to do with the matter?”

“She at least made her promise not to follow us. That promise was broken.”

“Ah. That is why our Dear Little Sister has been in something of a snit. Particularly towards her friend.”

“She never said anything?”

“Nary a word, Dear Brother. I cannot say that I blame her. It is a most embarrassing situation.”

“That is what she said to her friend. I hope that they work this out. Perhaps once she shows she has become proficient in self defense?”

“Perhaps.”

“What language is that?” asked Yuki. “I've heard you and Ayeka use it before, but I have no idea what you are saying. It's very different from English and Japanese. It doesn't even sound like Korean or Mandarin.”

I smiled and patted Yuki on the head. “It is Old High Juraian – the ancient version of the language the Nobility use exclusively amongst themselves. Originally, though, it was a code-language. You see, Ayeka's ancestors were originally pirates, so they had a secret language that was very hard to decipher. Eventually, though, after the First Emperor discovered Tsunami and was given the First of the First Generation Trees, the language simplified a bit and was used only by the Royal Family. Everyone else spoke Galactic Standard.”

“Can I learn to speak Old High Juraian?”

“Only after we are married, Yuki-chan. Not a moment before because only members of the Royal Family may know it. I'm the only exception because I know secrets that no one else should know. This way, if I had to tell them something important but didn't want anyone else to know, I would have a way to do so. Besides, I'm being adopted by Lady Funaho anyhow.”

“What kind of secrets?” asked Yuki. “I know that you... somehow saw the future...”

I sighed and put an arm around Yuki. “I know that you were only ever supposed to be a normal little girl. You were never supposed to meet me. In fact, I shouldn't even exist here. It was Mihoshi-chan that was supposed to save you. And you were never supposed to know about the secrets of the Masaki family.”

I felt Yuki shudder and bury her head in my side. “Will you ever disappear?” she asked.

“I hope not,” I replied with genuine worry.

Yuki was quiet for a moment. “Will I ever forget you?”

Not wanting to take my eyes off the road, I switched hands on the steering wheel, grabbed one of Yuki's, brought it up to my face and gave it a heartfelt kiss.

“I hope not.”

I felt a hand on my shoulder. Looking over briefly, I saw that it was Ayeka trying to comfort me... and probably herself as well, since she wore a deeply worried and pensive expression. There was only one reason for this.

Love.

Ayeka loved me. There was no doubt in my mind about it. I was her brother in all but name and blood, and she would gladly go down in flames defending that claim. It's a sobering thought that a princess as powerful as her would go that far for your sake.

It was also an empowering one – and not something I was ever going to take for granted, because I had come to love Ayeka dearly as well. Of course, she was so beautiful and refined – Ayeka was a fine specimen of a woman that way. But there was also the gentle way she would speak with me, even while teasing me over something like Yuki's affections. And there were also the times she would come to while away her free time with me in my garden, alternating between her and I enjoying a pot of tea over light topics, or helping me with my garden.

We had bonded and, without really realizing it, come to love each other as siblings.

I don't know why I hadn't realized it sooner, even though we used the titles, even though I told Funaho flat-out that I would die for these people...

Ayeka has such a soft heart... softer even than Sasami's...

If I were to die, I realized, it would devastate her as surely as if something terrible were to happen to Tenchi.

New plan:

Don't die.

Never.

Instead, be the stubborn little cuss that you are, the one that will always get back up again and beat his enemies with pure stubborn desire to outlive them. But most importantly, try not to wind up in those situations in the first place.

I reached up and gave the hand on my shoulder a squeeze. *I never want to see you cry, my beloved sister. At the very least, not for me.*

We arrived at the mines and I laid waste to the token guardsmen at the gates with my typical efficiency.

“Gracious,” said Ayeka, taken by surprise by my brutal use of superior firepower. “Dear Brother, isn't that a little unfair?”

“I don't believe in playing fair when it comes to war. Besides, these men are loyal to that swine of a man.”

Ayeka's features darkened for a moment. “Point taken, Dear Brother. Let us continue.” Before I did continue, I placed The End of the Quiet Day back into Scooby and got out a long, simple looking, unadorned box from the truck.

“What's that?” asked Sasami while the others looked on curiously.

“A gift for Tenchi. Let's go.”

I don't know how Lord Ohsa beat us there. *Maybe he used an air-car?* It was no matter, though. I let Ayeka handle the theatrics while I skirted around the edges and made my way to Tenchi.

“Brother, here,” I said, handing him the sheathed blade I had been carrying. “A gift from your Grandfather – only a sword wielded is truly a sword.” Tenchi took the proffered weapon and smiled knowing exactly whose sentiment that had been.

“Thanks for thinking ahead,” he said as he tucked the weapon into his belt and readied himself to fight.

“Not a problem.” I then drew my own sword. It was not the bokuto that Yosho had given me. What I drew was live steel.

I named it First Cut – the first sword I ever made to gain Yakage's approval.

He had allowed me a great deal of free reign to create my first sword. In its own way that was a test to see if I would create something ridiculous or something useful.

I began with researching alloys, paying particular attention to those with a high tungsten content. I eventually settled on T1 High Speed Steel – commonly used for drill bits used to mill out things like gears for transmissions. It had excellent wear resistance and would even stand up to high temperatures quite admirably. It was strong enough that even Ryoko would have to expend an effort (albeit a small one) to break it. Especially after I got done with it.

Forging this steel was a pain. Literally. I had to wear special equipment just to handle the ambient heat of the metal as I worked it over again and again.

In the end, I had created a long sword based closely on Gandalf's Glamdring in Lord of the Rings. Like Glamdring, it was a beautiful piece of workmanship – simple, practical, yet utterly breathtaking. That had definitely been one of Yakage's favorite points. Apparently, I had a certain flair.

However, unlike Glamdring, First Cut had none of the frills. There was no inscription. There were no jewels. I had engineered the weapon with nothing but functionality in mind, and only then did I add the decorative flourishes – much like the engineers and architects of the Art Deco movement where the machine or structure itself was the art and not its adornments.

Best of all was the balance. I had used tungsten carbide for the pommel to help counterbalance the weapon, and it worked out quite well, giving me a weapon that I can swing easily despite its weight.

While Tenchi's blade glowed a crimson light, my blade caught the brilliant desert sun and shone like a phosphorous flare. The guardsmen all faltered at the sight of the blades.

I grinned at their fear. “Well!?” I challenged. “WHO WANTS TO LIVE FOREVER!?”
RAAAAAAAAAUUUUUUUUUGGGHH!!!”

And that was the straw that broke the camel's back.

This group more than likely represented the last of Ohsa's loyal guardsmen. Over the last twenty-four hours I had maimed and killed all but this handful of men before us. They had already been thoroughly demoralized, and were being ordered to go up against two swordsmen armed with very intimidating blades and who moved like they knew how to use them.

They all ran screaming for their lives.

Lord Ohsa looked around nervously. None of his guardsmen remained and he was now surrounded by vengeful looking miners. But more importantly...

“That glow!” he cried out nervously pointing to Tenchi's blade. “That sword is made of Hielzen-S... It only glows red when held by a member of the Royal Family! Then you must be...” Ohsa suddenly threw his staff down, crying out, “I surrender!”

And here I was hoping he'd fight. Then I would have had the chance to kill that disgusting excuse of a man. Instead, I sheathed my sword – so much for getting it blooded – and tapped a brief sequence on my C-Pod.

“Lady Seto, Grimm. It's done, Grandmother.”

The wrap-up was almost anticlimactic. Seto's *Mikagami* arrived and the security forces dispersed to recover Lord Ohsa's guardsmen and his own personal bodyguard from the palace. Ohsa himself was taken directly into custody by Seto.

Just as I was wondering where Minaho was (she usually wasn't very far when Seto was around) I heard a voice behind me.

“Are you Garrick Grimm?”

I turned and there stood a dark haired beauty. Her short bangs framed her pale, fine-as-porcelain face and the seemingly bottomless indigo eyes stared at me like the abyss. Whoah, spooky.

“I am he,” I confirmed. “You must be Minaho.”

She stared at me, unnervingly quiet for a moment. “You told Seto-sama you thought I was cute.” The statement was nearly accusatory in tone.

Hoo boy. “I believe I did,” I admitted. Her expression darkened, so I sighed and said, “Look, are you honestly going to get angry at me because I paid you a complement to the face of your boss-slash-Great-Grandmother? I know she can be a bit much to deal with sometimes, but you just gotta know when to bend with the wind.”

Minaho's dark looked shifted into an outright glare. “I do not need advice from a man that hasn't even lived a quarter of the life I have.”

That seriously hacked me off. If she thought that just living longer imparted some Jedi-like greater wisdom then I was going to show her just how mistaken she was.

“Oh, aren't we putting on airs now! Tell me little princess, do you even pay attention to what Seto says about me? Because knowing her she's already given you several earfuls.”

Minaho turned her nose up at me... it was not adorable like when Yuki does it.

“All I need to know is that you're yet another suitor that Seto is trying to set me up with.”

“Uh-huh!” I declared. “And that's all you need to know?”

“Of course!” Minaho snapped.

“Very well then. As lovely as you are when you're angry, you bother me. And I have enough bothers as it is. Go away, little girl.”

I could see a vein throbbing on her forehead. Now that was a fascinating thing to see, let me tell you.

“You...” she hissed out, seething. “You *dare* to belittle me!?” In a flash her battle armor appeared as well as an energy sword in her hands. “Draw your inferior weapon, boy!”

I smiled. I was certain it was not one of my nicer ones, given the way Tenchi and the others blanched. Seto, of course, was smiling too, unbeknownst to Minaho.

“You really don't know me, do you?” I said as I knelt down to casually scoop a handful of the dusty earth that filled the mine site. I looked at it carefully, studying the way it shifted, the fineness and shape of its grains, and the way the light caught them.

“What does it matter?” growled Minaho.

“If you know the enemy and you know yourself, you need not fear the results of a hundred battles. If you know yourself, but not the enemy, for every victory gained, you will also suffer defeat. If you know neither the enemy, nor yourself, you will succumb in every battle.” God I love Sun Tzu. Thank you VNV Nation for making me see how awesome this ancient general truly was.

And I had already won. It was time for me to seek my battle.

“You dare to presume you know tactics!?” snarled Minaho. “You are nothing in comparison to me! You are just a child!” I had to admit she had fire in her... Juraian women were wonderful in that way. But fire is not always enough. I was glad that Yuki was watching. This will be a beautiful object lesson for her.

“Rule number one: don't piss me off.”

“RAAAGH!” screamed Minaho as she launched herself at me. In a flash my hand flung out, casting the dry silt into her face. Minaho yelped in pain as it got in her eyes and began choking on the dust. I gave her no chance to recover, quickly drawing First Cut, batting away the handle of her energy blade in one strike, and then opening a shallow cut under the ribs on her left side, causing her to yelp in pain once more.

My weapon had finally tasted blood.

When she was able to open her eyes once more, it was to the sight of me holding the tip of First Cut to her neck.

“Rule number two: I fight to win, and if that means I must cheat, then I will do it with a smile on my face.

“Rule number three: I don't generally believe in taking prisoners... but I definitely believe in sending a message. Lady Seto?” I called out, not taking my eyes off Minaho.

“Yes, my dearest Grandson?” Seto replied sounding quite pleased.

“I would like Minaho to keep the scar I just gave her. It can be a neat and faint line – no need for it to be ugly – I know how fastidious a woman is about her skin. Just a simple reminder... she should never underestimate anyone.”

“WHAT!?” screeched Minaho in horror.

“My Grandson makes a very fine point, Minaho. You were quite reckless in engaging him. You not only disrespected him based only on his heritage (your Grandmother will be ashamed of you, by the way), but you also failed to pay attention to everything I said about him. If you had, you would have known exactly how dangerous my darling Grandson could be.”

“But... You can't do this to me!” cried out Minaho.

“It is only a scar,” Seto replied evenly. “Would you like for me to give you a matching one on the other side?”

Minaho's eyes went wide at that, and she quickly fell silent. Her head then fell low as she meekly acquiesced.

“Good. Now, go up to *Mikagame* and have that treated as we discussed.”

“I shall do as you command, Lady Seto.” I withdrew First Cut and cleaned the blood off with a cloth before sheathing the weapon. Without another word, but eyeing me warily, Minaho got up, carefully staunching the minor wound, and began to make her way to *Mikagame*.

Seto sighed as she approached. “I apologize, Garrick. That is not at all how I hoped your first meeting would go. I'd hoped that Minaho would have paid more attention to me and learned something about you that she might find attractive.”

“She'll come around,” I said, sighing. “It is a shame. She really is quite lovely.”

Seto gave me a puzzled look. “You regret giving her a scar?” she said curiously.

I smiled back wryly. “I regret that she is a spoiled child. Scars are different – they give a person, especially women, a certain character. Some time I'll have to show you some of the safer

animations in my collection. Galaxy Express Three-Nine was still considered pretty good stuff when I got zapped, and it was as old as me at the time. A real classic. You'd love Queen Emeraldas. She's your kind of bad ass. She has a huge facial scar that doesn't do much to hide her beauty. Makes her intimidating as all hell, though."

Seto smiled. "That sounds like a good way to spend a rainy day. Would you send me the files?"

"Sure. I'll even ask Washu-chan convert them into something compatible." I sighed heavily. "Shameful first impression. Did you really have to go that far with her, Grandmother?"

Seto actually blushed a bit. "Well... I might have. Just a little bit."

I sighed and shook my head. "Ah well. There's always Tenyo. At least she's got a sense of humor... and nowhere nearly one as demented as her mother's."

"You do know that was because the poor woman was going senile."

"Oh damn, sorry... On second thought, not quite. I bet Kiyone was absolute hell on wheels when she was a kid, wasn't she?"

Seto rolled her eyes. "You have no idea."

I grinned. "Oh I can imagine. I wasn't much different when I was a kid... I was just a little more..."

"Energetic?" hazarded Seto.

"Willing to do grievous harm," I said succinctly.

Seto blinked. "I love you, Garrick, but I am not babysitting for you."

I could only laugh at that. It's not every day you get one over the Devil Princess of Jurai.

Suddenly, we were approached by a wizened looking old native of this world.

"Excuse me, young man... But the Crown Prince claims that you are his brother."

"Though we are not related by blood," I confirmed, "we do regard each other as such. He is the Right Hand and I am the Left."

"You don't mean that you're not in favor, do you?" asked the elder.

"Not at all," I replied with a genial smile. "It means that I am the one that will gladly take the dirty work for the sake of my new-found family."

"I see then... that blade you carry. May I see it?"

I nodded and unsheathed First Cut once more, offering it, handle first, to the elder. He appraised the weapon with a keen and knowing eye, making thoughtful, positive sounds deep in his throat.

"This is good workmanship. Who forged this?"

"I did. It is my first sword, and so I have named it First Cut."

The old man gave me a surprised look. "This weapon is at least journeyman-level! And a seasoned one at that! For it to be your first blade..." He then paused and gave me a hard look. "Who was your teacher, son?"

"My teacher was Yakage of Jurai," I replied solemnly. "He passed away the night after I crafted that sword."

A distant and sorrowful look crossed the elders face. "As though he had seen that his student was strong enough to stand on his own..." His eyes suddenly fastened onto mine with a great intensity. "Yes. You are definitely worthy of this, son. My sword!" he called out.

A large man stepped forward – he was the one whose home we had first visited, the one who we helped when his child was born. He wore a smile on his face as he carried a carefully wrapped weapon, and he passed it over to the elder.

"This sword," said the old man, "is the sibling blade to the one your brother wields. Long ago a swordsman from another world met my predecessor, a renowned swordsmith. The two had forged a

bond of friendship and from that friendship a formidable sword discipline was born... the very same one that you and your brother practice.

“Also, there was what you said to your brother before the fight was to commence. You said, ‘Only a sword wielded is truly a sword.’ Those were the words of the swordsman from long ago.

“With all this known, there could be no other person to wield this weapon... Young man, this sword rightfully belongs to you. Please, treasure it always.”

Touched at my very core, I bowed my head as I held my hands out and accepted the gift. The ceremony complete, I carefully tucked it into my belt next to First Cut.

“There is one other thing I must ask of you, son,” said the old man. “We have heard of your exploits here on our world. Now that my Grandson is one day old, he must be named. Tell us yours so he may bear it for himself.”

I smiled. “Bring him here. I know what I must do now.” The father nodded and waived his wife over with their son. “He is your son,” I said with a heavy, but positive tone. “You made him together. You will raise him together. So it is only proper that for me to lay this burden upon him, you help him carry it together.”

In my home time-line, this sort of blessing was done within our church by the Elders of the Priesthood, and with the child's head anointed with consecrated olive oil for the laying of hands. But this place was not home... but my intent was similar. I only hoped that it would be smiled upon.

Knowing Tsunami, it would be.

With the mother and father carefully cradling their son between them, I stood at his head.

“What is the name of your family?” I asked.

“Kurotsuchi,” said the father proudly.

I nodded, gently laid my hands on the infant's head, wishing him nothing but love and blessings.

I closed my eyes and began to pray. “Humbly, I invoke your name, Tsunami-sama, and ask that you smile upon us this day and lend your power to me so I may grant this child a blessing...”

And then I felt her presence and I knew I had her ear.

“Garrick Kurotsuchi... I grant you my own name so you may have my strength for all your days. Take pride in your name, child. It's meaning is ‘He that leads with a spear’ – a name for a warrior king. Though it is foreign, it is an ancient name that evokes a sense of nobility and strength from a time when both were in short supply. Little Garrick, my blessing to you is to be the rock that others can hang on to for support when the skies go dark and the flood waters rise and the tempest rages. Where there is sorrow, you can bring joy. Where there is anger, you can bring peace. Where there is chaos, you can bring order. Where there is ignorance, you can bring enlightenment. Where there is fear, you can bring comfort.

“And do not be afraid yourself, child. For while you do all these things, your people will in turn give you their strength and their support. Let them carry you and you will never feel the weight of your burdens. Do this and there will be joy and prosperity, even in the most difficult times.

“Amen.”

Soon enough we were away once more. While I had been occupied, Seto had a brief conversation with Minagi and Yuki. The overall impression I got from Seto afterwards was that she was quite pleased with the two.

Right then, Minagi was helping Yuki get out of the elaborate Maiko girl robes. I was just dozing in the bed, recovering after a hard-fought twenty-four hours.

I wasn't surprised when Yuki thudded into the mattress, crawled over, and snuggled into my chest.

What did surprise me was how she began crying.

“Yuki-chan?” I asked, probably sounding a bit sleepier than I wanted to. “What's wrong my tiny little love?”

“sasami-chan... she was right.”

I carefully sat up, pulling the tiny girl into my lap and cradling her while Minagi came up from the other side and leaned against me, giving me her support while she gently soothed Yuki.

“Tell me what happened, love.”

Slowly, haltingly, she did with some help from Minagi. It had begun with her being made to dance. She didn't really know any, so he made Ayeka show her how. And afterwards he made her serve him wine. And then the touching began and that was when she knew without a doubt what kind of peril she was in.

When Ohsa finally felt up Yuki, Ayeka, my beautiful guardian angel of a sister, came down on that animal with all the fury of an enraged noble woman endowed with the power of Jurai.

That... could have been nothing less than glorious... especially since it was discovered that Ohsa had been struck into a stupor that he did not come out of for hours. Minagi's roofie, it had seemed, was no longer needed. Ayeka herself was even surprised that she had managed to pull that off. But I knew why.

My Beloved Sister had reserves of strength even she did not know about, and it would only come to the fore when someone she genuinely cared for was in real danger.

In the aftermath, Sasami and Yuki had made up. Now that Yuki fully understood what sort of dangers she could find herself in, particularly as girl, she swore to never take our warnings for granted.

While I was glad that Yuki had grown as a person, and had made up with Sasami... I just wish that it hadn't come at the cost of this part of her innocence.

After that, Minagi could only sit there, together, comforting little Yuki.

Almost without thinking about it, I began to hum softly. The tune was deep-toned and somber. It was *Misty Mountains Cold*, the Dwarven hymn from Tolkien's Middle Earth books. The deep tones ran smoothly and soothingly from my throat and buzzed within my head. I soon laid down and let Yuki lay on my chest, her little head nestled under my chin. Surely my voice was buzzing softly through her head as well. I don't know of anything that could have a more calming effect.

Soon Yuki's sobbing subsided. Her tears stopped coming. Her breath would still hitch, even after I knew her eyes had closed long ago and began to draw long, slow breaths.

We all fell asleep together like that. At some point I was stirred to wakefulness by Yuki shifting from me to Minagi.

And I couldn't go back to sleep.

There was a sliver in my mind. Something was bothering me. An odd sensation, I'd almost call it a compulsion.

I went to the hold where Scooby was tied down, opened the tailgate and pull out the sword that I had been gifted with. In the dim light, I began to pull the blade from the sheath.

Earlier, before I had given Tenchi his sword, I had seen the steel in the daylight. It was silvery-gray just like First Cut.

And now... it was red.

“Hinase?”

“How may I help you Garrick?”

“Turn off all the lights here in the cargo hold.”

“Ah... sure, if that's what you want.”

The lights then faded into darkness... and the blade before me glowed with a dull red color – the same you would see on a heating element just as it was starting to warm up.

“Hinase, contact Washu on the *Mimisaka* and ask that she comes over right away. Pass on the phrase 'Code Murphy.' And make sure *Mimisaka* knows that Washu is the only one to be bothered. I need her to see this and it needs to be kept a secret... for now.”

Code Murphy.

One of several phrases Washu and I concocted as a sort of series of safe words. In the case of Code Murphy, it was a direct opposite of Pondstrider. Murphy meant that something fundamental had radically changed and required immediate attention.

That said, it took Washu no more than thirty seconds to arrive by teleportation wearing a worried expression.

“Garrick, what's going on?”

“This,” I said. “Hinase, kill the lights again.” The lights went down and I unsheathed my blade, revealing its dull crimson glow.

“Oh... oh wow. This is unprecedented. Are you certain that you had no genetic ties to Japan in your homeworld?”

I nodded as I sheathed the sword and the lights came back on. “The closest I can get is my Native American ancestry, and that, at best, makes the two lineages distant cousins. It's not genetic. Try scanning for exotic energy and use a very low detection threshold.”

“Sounds like you have a hypothesis,” Washu chirped as she opened a small portal to who knows where and stuck her arm through it, rummaging around through who knew what. “Care to share?”

I nodded. “Hielzen-S doesn't react to genetics. It reacts to energy signatures. Any blood-relation of the Royal Family can emit this signature. In particular, Tenchi-kun. His is so strong that you have no idea how he's generating it. Pondstrider: Tsunami is searching for a being of even greater power than her own. To that end, she has nurtured the people of Jurai because she saw the potential in the First Emperor.”

Washu gave me a startled look. “So, she's looking for the same thing I am... Ah! Here it is!”

She pulled out a device and activated it, causing the probe at the head of the device to extend a set of wings with blinking lights.

“Is that a Spengler Flux meter?” I asked with a raised eyebrow.

Washu giggled. “Kind of. It's actually kinda scary how close that movie was to the truth of these things.”

“Yeah, you're looking at the reason for that 'scary' right now.”

Washu snorted. “The scientific community is gonna have a field day with you once I publish my paper on transfictionality...” She trailed off as she took the reading of the meter and her face fell. “There's no way.”

“What is it?” I asked.

“Your energy signature... it's similar to Tenchi's! Nowhere nearly as powerful like you thought, but it's there... different, like you're some long-lost branch of the family line, but still close enough that if you had enough power you could generate a Lighthawk Wing yourself!”

I nodded. “I think I know why, Washu-chan...”

“Well don't keep me waiting here!”

I gave her my most level look. “I am a son of Elohim. As one of his seed, I have the potential to someday become as he is.”

“Are you saying you're a god, buster!?” Washu accused.

“Not yet. It'll probably take a couple thousand years. Think of me as a larva – utterly weak and helpless. But with time and care...”

“Caterpillars turn into butterflies...” Washu replied thoughtfully. “But you don't live long enough to get to that point. How is it supposed to happen?”

I shrugged. “Heaven. A safe place for our souls to return to after death. Judgment. God looks on the past deeds of our Earthly life and determines how far we should progress. Resurrection. A process to get our bodies back after death, only perfected and immortal.”

“But that still doesn't explain how you're supposed to become a god.”

I thought about that for a moment. “Children that do not get enough of the proper nutrition become stunted.”

“Wait, you mean they feed you their energy?” Washu replied, catching on right away.

“Is it so strange? Mothers breastfeed their children. And by this perspective I am certainly an infant still.”

“But how does that explain you getting stronger?”

I blinked at Washu. “What do you mean?”

“When you first got here you could barely even make the needle on this thing budge. Now... It's still a pretty small reading, but one that's closer to what most Juraians put out. You're not quite at the level of the main-line Royal Family, more like one of the distant cousins – like Kiriko and her family.”

I'd actually met Kiriko Masaki a couple of times. Mostly when she was taking care of Seina. I had managed to impress the hell out of her when I had managed to avoid not just one or two, but three incidences of Seina's bad luck. Kiriko was so astonished that she pulled me aside and demanded to know all the details about me, because no normal Earthman could avoid Seina's bad luck so effectively. It was the most fun spilling the beans I've ever had.

I thought about what Washu had said and voiced them as I went along. “The only way that could be would be is if someone was feeding me energy. The only one that I could imagine doing that would be Tsunami, but I don't quite... wait... KATHERINE!”

Washu blinked as the relays connected. “OF COURSE! It makes so much sense! Katherine doesn't have to be bonded to you to feed you a small supply of energy! And best of all it's all disguised as political subterfuge! Not that I don't think Tsunami hasn't taken a liking to you regardless,” she added with a wink and a nudge.

“Oh ha ha,” I replied, rolling my eyes. “C'mon, let's go and see if we're right,” I said as I pulled up my C-Space app on my C-pod.

When I arrived with Washu inside my garden, Katherine greeted us both cheerfully with her beams of radiant rainbow light.

“I'm glad to see you too, Katherine,” I said as I began to methodically check the small sapling for parasites. I knew that there wouldn't be any – not in there – but it was the thought that counted. “Katherine, sweet heart? I need to ask you an important question.”

“*What is it, Garrick?*” the tree replied, her telepathic voice sounding like a happy and innocent five-year-old girl.

“Have you been giving me a share of your energy?”

“*Yes! I have!*” the tree cried out joyously. “*Grandmother Tsunami was so worried about you! She thought that you would starve without it, but instead you're getting stronger! Once she saw that, she asked me to keep on feeding you so you can be really strong some day like Tenchi!*”

“Woof!” cried out Washu. “That's no small order – Tenchi is at least as strong as a First-Generation Tree!”

“*Silly! It is very possible! As long as they lead long lives, Tenchi and Garrick will both become a lot stronger. Some day, Grandmother Tsunami wants them to stand above her... Uh, I don't think I should have said that...*”

And right then Tsunami appeared as a phantom-like apparition, standing above us with the sort of look a mother has when she catches her children with their hands in the cookie jar.

“KYAA!” cried out Katherine. *“I’m, so sorry Grandmother! But you said I should be nice to Garrick, and he’s been so nice to me, too, that I don’t wanna hide anything from him! Please forgive me!”*

Tsunami sighed. *“Don’t fret, child. While this was not what I wanted, it was inevitable with people as clever as these.”*

“So,” I said. “Is now the time you spoke of, Tsunami-sama?”

Tsunami gave me a measuring look. *“Yes, Garrick, I believe it is.”*

“To begin with, I know not from where you came from. You suddenly appeared in our universe, frightened, confused, and utterly alone. A waif in the truest sense of the word and with a sorrow so despairing that it was palpable in the very air around you.”

“Imagine my surprise when I took a closer look at you, and saw in you a power distantly related to my own, only immature and undeveloped. As little Katherine said, you were so weak that I worried that you were starving, so I asked Funaho to make a seed for you.”

“That was me!” cried out Katherine happily. *“I am so happy that Mama made me because I get to be with you, Garrick! And because you have taken such good care of me, I promise I’m gonna take good care of you! I’ll make sure that you live long enough that you can stand without help!”*

I smiled down at the sapling and stroked her leaves gently, eliciting a telepathic giggle from Katherine.

It was a bit of a moral quandary for me. We really aren’t supposed to gain such power until we have been deemed responsible enough to wield them. And even then, it’s not so much we were granted power by God – more like we ask of him something and, if he sees that we and the request are worthy, then he will provide the way.

No, what was going on was that I was gaining my own power to use as I saw fit... kinda scary when you thought of it. But I knew that I was a long ways from home. God wouldn’t be able to protect me, so it was in my best interest to gain power and learn how to wield it.

In a ways, I was in a similar situation to Yuki, only this was not of my own doing.

“Someone out there does not have my best interests in mind,” I said at last. “Tsunami-sama, I am grateful to you for taking me under your wing.”

“Great!” said Washu impatiently. “Now what about this business of looking for a being of higher power?”

“You and I simply have different methodologies, Washu. You seek to create one. I have been attempting to nurture one. However... it seems someone has thrown evidence of their existence right before us.”

“Oh?”

Tsunami turned to me. *“Garrick. How powerful would you say your Father is?”*

I sighed at that. “All that we had on the matter are religious texts whose original publication went back thousands of years before the printing press was even invented on our world. What’s worse is that the details are quite vague on the matter. It is said he created everything and made worlds without number. All blessings and miracles are attributed to him. I can go on and on, but unfortunately without him here to confirm any of it for us, all evidence is circumstantial at best.”

“We have you though, Garrick,” said Washu with a knowing smile. “And time is on our side. I’ve lived for twenty-thousand years, and I can live for many more thousands. Plenty of time for you to grow into your own power, right Tsunami-sama?”

Tsunami nodded. *“Indeed. I will continue giving you an allotment of energy through Katherine. Washu may record your growth and development with her help. In fact, as soon as you*

arrive at Jurai I will make sure that you are called forth for the bonding ceremony. You will live a very long and fruitful life, Garrick, and through it all Katherine will be at your side."

I was shocked. So soon? Being bonded to Katherine? But then again, Seto did say that things would be resolved as soon as I got to Jurai.

"I... I don't know what to say... Heh... I told Lady Funaho... 'What I wouldn't do with centuries'... now I get thousands!"

"It is that much more time that we get to have you with us, Garrick," Tsunami said with a gentle smile. *"And more if you become what I hope you are."*

"That reminds me," I said. "This needs to be a secret between us."

"Oh?" said Washu curiously. "Do you really think it will affect opinion of the others?"

"Probably not, but I would feel better if this was a confidential matter. There's no need for them to know for the time being regardless. And once I am bonded to Katherine an increase in my own capabilities and my lifespan is expected anyhow."

Tsunami looked to Washu and shrugged. *"He does make a good point. Sasami and I were terrified of being rejected until Ayeka reminded Sasami of how much she loves her, no matter the circumstances. Garrick just needs that affirmation himself, and he won't get it until it happens."*

"Alright," said Washu. "He can have his confidentiality. It is his right, after all."

"Thank you," I said, and suddenly yawned. "Uuggghh... Dunno about you two but I need to get back to sleep. Got a busy day ahead of me tomorrow."

"That's a sound idea," Washu agreed, stretching out her tiny body.

"Indeed," said Tsunami. *"Sasami rests much better when I'm not actively manifesting myself."*

With a sigh I dropped back into bed. Minagi didn't move an inch – weird that she was such a deep sleeper, but then again its probably because she trusts me that much.

Same with Yuki for that matter, because once I settled in she immediately sat up while still asleep and fell onto me, latching on tightly. With a smile I put an arm around her and kissed her head.

And then, to my mild surprise, Minagi teleported to the other side of the bed and snuggled up to me.

"I missed you," she softly murmured without opening her eyes. "Yuki helped keep me warm, but you're much better. Do you feel better now?"

"Yes," I replied, contemplating the answer and finding that I did indeed feel better. "Yes, I do."

"Good," she replied and then leaned in to kiss me.

There was passion, but no real fire. Just a heartfelt desire to reconnect and be together. A moment after our lips parted, Minagi opened her eyes and looked intensely into my own.

"I want to make a child with you, Garrick."

I looked back into Minagi's lovely golden eyes. "That is a major decision. Are you sure that you're up for it?"

Minagi nodded her head. "After this last week, I know that you'd be a perfect father. You won't abandon your child. You'll be firm with your child... but they won't have any doubt in their mind that you love them. And with you... I know that your child will be special."

"Ahhh. But, what about..." I looked down at Yuki and Minagi sighed.

"As much as I have come to love her over the last week, she will have to wait her turn."

Minagi's voice then turned coy. "After all, I saw you first, Garrick."

"So, we'll find some time apart from Yuki?"

"Probably while we are on Jurai. Sasami-chan will have things to show her anyhow. I just worry about Seto."

“Don't. I'll ask her if she'll give us some space before sicking the nubile young bachelorettes on me. She did mention that the First Wife will probably be a member of the Royal Family, right?”

Minagi nodded. “Don't care. As long as I have you, it won't matter. Especially if she is someone like Ayeka.”

She kissed me once more, then we all snuggled into the covers and went to sleep.

The next morning Yuki and I woke up together.

As we prepared for the morning's exercises, though, I heard Yuki pause as she was binding her chest.

“I shouldn't be here,” she said.

I gave her a searching look. “Agreed,” I said mildly.

“Why didn't you take me back?” she said suddenly, turning to face me with a hard look. “You could have done it. We have two ships here. Three, if you count Ryo-Ohki.”

“We could,” I agreed in that mild tone once again as I went to Yuki, took the ace bandage from her hands, and began to finish binding her chest for her. “But the problem is that we're being followed. If we don't employ stealth measures they'll catch up to us in a heartbeat. That is part of why this trip to Ryuten is taking as long as it is. And for one of us to race back to Earth and race back would be like running with a lit flare.

“Besides, at that point in time I knew that you would no longer be easily dissuaded. If not now, then at some other time you would have tagged along on another, potentially more dangerous mission. No, my tiny love. I have decided that it is for the best that you touch the fire you find so fascinating... and learn for yourself just how badly it burns.”

“You're so cruel,” she whispered sorrowfully as I secured the binding. “Letting me experience something like that.”

I turned Yuki around and forced her to look me in the eyes. “You are the cruel one,” I told her flat out. “You forced me to make my sweet little Yuki-chan, who I love so much, cry her beautiful eyes out.”

Once again, I saw her eyes begin to tear up. “Why are you so mean to me?”

“Because I love you, Yuki. If I didn't care then would I help you become stronger?”

She knew the answer. We'd had this conversation before.

Yuki bowed her head. “No, you wouldn't.”

I sighed and pulled the little girl into a hug and, to my mild surprise, she bounced up and wrapped herself around me. I could only smile at the sudden affection and just held her for a moment.

After a while, though... “Yuki-chan? We need to get back to work. Sasami-chan will be here soon and I know you don't want to disappoint her.”

Yuki nodded and I set her down so she could finish getting ready. It was going to be another long day of grinding, but different now that Sasami and Yuki had made up. I couldn't wait to see how they would work together now.

Soon enough, Yuki had worked through her Calisthenics routine. Sasami arrived about halfway through and watched curiously. As soon as Yuki was finished, though, Sasami had all but pounced on Yuki while bearing a bento packed full of food for all of us. Lo and behold, Minagi arrived, seemingly half asleep as she levitated across the floor and as though being led by something that was grasping her by the nose.

We ate. We talked. We laughed. And I soon came to the realization that this was something that I had missed over the last few days. I had, without realizing it, been punishing myself as well as Yuki... though, I suppose I did deserve it, considering I let things get as far as they had.

It was too late to do anything about it, though. The damage was done. I loved Yuki, and she loved me. The only thing for us to do was to wait and make sure Yuki herself was ready for what would come.

After the meal, Minagi proclaimed that I had been disregarding my own training and that while Yuki and Sasami were training, Minagi and I would do the same elsewhere.

Little did I know at the time, however, that Minagi's 'training' involved her bed and a total lack of apparel.

Minagi and I were big on physical intimacy.

It wasn't the defining characteristic of our relationship. We had our common interests, chief amongst them being swordsmanship. Most of all it was how we saw each other in ourselves. The both of us had such gentle natures in spite of an immense capability of brutality. And this despite the different paths in our lives. Minagi, being honed to perfection by a harsh, yet loving father figure. Me, being bullied, pushed, and ground down in adversity, and yet coming out of it better than most could have hoped for.

Another thing I appreciated about Minagi was that while she did indeed pity me, she actually did something about it.

I couldn't blame her for her pity, really. Even though I had my new family and their unconditional love and support, I still had the scars of everything that I had been through. My new family's love was a good balm for that scar tissue in my soul, but it would be there for a long, long time. It would probably never go away, in fact. At any given moment, I might be caught staring off into nothing as my mind had been captured by some small reminder and thrown back into the past.

Whenever she caught me like that she never said anything about it. When I came out of those trances she would be there waiting with a smile on her face, and then give me a hug and a kiss to remind me she was there for me. And that was Minagi for you: sweet, gentle, quiet... and straightforward.

Hence why I found myself in bed with her, basking in the afterglow – regardless of the reason, Minagi would not tolerate me being troubled over something. Say what you will, but nothing helps a couple decompress like a good bedwork session – and Minagi and I had been long overdue.

“So, miss me much?” I teased her.

Minagi scoffed at the comment. “It couldn't be helped,” she said wryly. “You were right to devote so much time to Yuki-chan. In a way, she needed you more than I did.”

“You really think so?” I asked, curious.

“Hmm,” Minagi said in an agreeable tone. “I'm a big girl. I know that you're not going to abandon me. Yuki, though... she's young still. She doesn't have my confidence... At least, not yet. And she was definitely worried that you were going to cast her to the side. Though I don't think she's worried about that anymore.”

“Indeed,” I sighed, rolling my eyes. “Really, though, how do you feel about her?”

“I approve of her,” Minagi replied easily. “She has a strong spirit. She doesn't give up. She works hard and she plays hard... though it may seem strange, for her there is no real difference between work and play. All that really matters to her is the challenge, and I really like that about her.”

“That said, she'll be good for us because, come what may, she'll be the one that will pick us up when we're at our lowest.”

I sighed in relief. “I'm glad you feel that way. I was honestly worried that you two would find yourselves at loggerheads.”

Minagi shrugged. “I was a bit worried myself, but she opened up to me so quickly that it became a non-issue.”

“Ah, good. By the way, I don't mean to pry but... how are you about relations with other women?”

“Relations?” said Minagi a little confusedly, but then she realized what I was getting at. “Oh! That!” She then smiled and went on, “Gender doesn't really matter to me. I know I may not have that much experience in physical intimacy, but I do know that love is love and no one can do anything to change that. What about you?”

I shrugged. “Heterosexual. I mean, I'm okay with the preferences of others – I don't hate on anyone for their preference or anything like that – but for my personal preference... the idea of even having another guy around while I'm in the act kinda squicks me.”

Minagi chuckled. “Rooster of the hen house, huh?”

“Guilty,” I singsonged.

“Hah!” Minagi crowed. “Well, I think I'll be just fine with you as the only father of my children.” And with that she leaned over and pecked me affectionately on the lips. “As for other women... Well, I'm open to it, so the rest is up to them. Why do you ask anyhow?”

“I'm a little concerned about Yuki.”

“Oh? You mean when she...” Minagi then giggled. “Yeah. That was a surprise the first time I saw it. I swear she was about ready to start sucking on them.” I spluttered at that and Minagi gave me an amused look.

“Sorry,” I apologized, a bit sheepishly. “Anyhow... if she shows anymore interest do you think you can handle her gently enough?”

“It shouldn't be a problem,” Minagi replied with a serene smile.

I sighed once again. “Thank the Goddess, one less thing for me to worry about.” I then looked to Minagi. “Loathe as I am to say it, love, but we need to get going. Sasami-chan won't be much longer with Yuki-chan.”

Minagi sighed dramatically. “Soooo tempting to just tie you to the bed...”

I blinked at that. “And you are now starting to become a somewhat frightening woman.”

Minagi only chuckled as she levitated off the bed, casting me a playful look as she made for the bathroom.

While Minagi instructed Yuki, I went with Sasami back to the *Mimisaka* to visit with the rest of my family.

At some point, though, I felt the desire to wander around some. That wasn't too hard – my family was more than amenable to leaving me to my own devices. However, it wasn't long until I found a distraction.

I suppose that's just in my nature, though.

It was a sound – a muted sort of hammering noise. I honestly had trouble placing it, but I knew that somehow it involved a hammer. Something so esoteric on a starship just perplexed me to the point of maddening, and so I just had to resolve the mystery.

I followed the sound until I reached its source – a rustic looking wood shop tucked inside a highly advanced starship! The very idea of it absolutely tickled me. And there was Asahi, the Woodcarver Princess, carving a bust of Goghei.

“So, is this where you while away your time, little carpenter bee?” I asked teasingly.

Asahi eeped cutely and tried to hide what she was doing. “What are you doing here!?” she cried out in surprise.

“Just visiting,” I said with a smile as I began to peruse her shop. Asahi was on edge, though, so I decided to make a bit of small talk to help put her at ease. “You know, my step-father used to do wood craft himself.”

“Your... step-father?” said Asahi in surprise. She was immediately disarmed and started to warm to the topic. “Wood crafting?”

I nodded. “It was... an aspiration of his... To make his own furniture, all from raw wood. He would have done it, too, if not for the tools he needed being so expensive.”

“Oh, that's so sad,” Asahi sighed plaintively. “I don't know what I would have done if my father hadn't been able to give me all these wonderful tools to work with.”

“I know what you mean.” Asahi gave me a perplexed look, so I went on. “My preferred medium is metal.” At that, I patted the pommel of First Cut where the handle and hilt jutted out from my belt. “But even so, my situation would have been similar to my step-father's if not for the help my family gave me.”

Asahi blinked in confusion. “You sound like you're talking about two different families. The others have mentioned something about you losing your family... and adopting you... but I'm afraid I don't understand what happened. They said that only you should really tell me – that it's really only your story to tell.”

I sighed thoughtfully. “My story, huh? Well... the thing is that I've been displaced across time and space through such a high-level dimension that even Washu is having trouble figuring it out. But the basic gist of it is that... everything I ever had was taken from me. There's no way that we know of to send me back home... not like there was much to go back to. My mother passed away in an accident couple of months before it happened and it tore my family apart.”

“Oh my gosh!” Asahi said as she covered her open-mouthed shock. “I'm so sorry!”

I nodded. “It's alright. I've started a new life here. Washu was the first to help me out. She was really kind to me and I'll never forget that. But it was Sasami-chan that saw how badly I was hurting. She was the one that got me started on the long path of healing my heart.

“You see, there's just no words to describe it, Asahi – that kind of loss: My family, my home, and even my faith to some extent. At first, the sorrow was so great that I might have died of a broken heart. It happens, you know... when some poor wretch out there truly has no one to turn to for any sort of warmth or love... they simply stop living, and no one can find a scientific reason for their passing.

“That was what Sasami-chan saw in me... and right away, she saved my life by naming me her beloved elder brother... not just a simple affection, but the real thing, because she knew that her love alone was not going to be enough. She talked to her Grandmother, Seto, and her mother and aunt, Misaki and Funaho. She even talked to her father, Emperor Azusa. And she told each of them the same thing: that she wanted me to be part of the family.

“I couldn't believe it was happening. My own family had never reached out like that for me. Apathy was what I was used to. To suddenly find myself so loved and so wanted... it was absolutely painful. And sweet goddess I cried on some nights because it hurt so much. Why did I have to lose everything to gain everything? But once the tears went away I came to realize that it's the only way we truly become strong – by surviving the very worst that life presents us with. So I let their love buoy me anyhow, because I knew the only other option was... to be lost, forever.”

I then reached down and pulled First Cut and showed it to Asahi.

“I suppose this is why I enjoy working with metal. Can you guess from looking at this how many times I folded over this steel before I gave it this final shape?”

“Fifty?” guessed Asahi. “A hundred?”

I shook my head. “I never kept count. My teacher himself lost count, but he assured me it was certainly thousands of folds. And this is a special tool-steel, meant to be used in only the most demanding of conditions like carving out bits of machinery from metal that is nearly as strong. The alloy is eighteen percent Tungsten. It is *very* heat resistant. I worked on this until my hands and arms

blistered from the withering heat. Washu-chan healed my hands, of course... but then I shocked my teacher by going right back into the smithy because *I wasn't finished yet*.

“This steel... is very much like me... strong only because it has gone through the most adverse conditions, and even then only because it was tough enough to make it through in the first place. It is very much like a piece of my heart and soul, especially since I've put a bit of both into it.”

“Is it good for you to have your heart be so hard?” asked Asahi.

I sighed. “You're a sweet young lady, Asahi... The thing is, there are times we must harden our hearts in order to do the things that must be done. Like punishing someone we love. Like the situation between Yuki and myself. For sure, I *could* decide to be easy on her and just let her have fun with everyone else... but the thing is we could wind up in grave danger – something we all know and understand, especially you.

“So, since Yuki is my responsibility, it falls to me to make her understand the consequences of her choice. I don't like doing it. It's hard on me because I honestly have come to love her. But, it's either that or I allow her to take more and more liberties until finally... bad ending.”

Asahi shuddered at the thought. “I see what you mean,” she said soberly. She looked down at First Cut once more. “I don't really know much about metal... except that I know a good tool when I see one.” Asahi then gave me a very serious look. “The only other thing I can compare this to is my father's tools.”

I nodded as I sheathed my sword once more. “Tell me, little carpenter bee, will you one day succeed your own father?”

“If... he wishes me to...”

“Then on that day, little carpenter bee, I shall forge you a set of tools that will make your ancestors weep with envy.”

Asahi blinked at me in surprise. “You... You can do that!?”

I smiled at her. “First Cut is my very first project beyond simply practicing my skills in the forge. It was the test to see if I was really ready to stand on my own – to make a weapon that could be of true use in this dangerous galaxy. And a weapon is just another tool under a different category. Though many swordsmiths out there are too prideful for it, I wouldn't give a second thought over making a set of wood carving tools, save for how I'd go about it.”

“But... We've hardly even talked! You don't even know me!”

I gave Asahi a gentle smile. “I do know you, Asahi. I have seen this adventure that we are on right now. I've seen how it ends. And I have seen how you comported yourself. You were magnificent, Asahi, and worthy of my friendship and trust. The only difference is that Yuki and myself were not here.”

Asahi gave me a frightened look. “Who are you?”

“Are you familiar with the concept of infinite monkeys on infinite typewriters?”

“Why?”

“Just answer the question.”

“Fine. I've heard about it. Now, why?”

“Washu-chan is still working on it, but you can apply that to the multi-verse in what she's calling Transfictional Theory. The basic idea being that with the Multiverse being infinitely vast and with infinite possibilities, it's entirely probable that everything we have experienced is a fictional story somewhere else.”

“What? You're lying!”

“Then how did I know about Goghei when you woke up on Earth?”

“That was just a lucky guess!”

“Alright then. If you won't believe me, then go ask Sasami-chan. She knows pretty much everything there is to know about me... and she loves me to tears.”

And then, as though on cue, the deck underneath our feet suddenly lurched. It reminded me a little bit of being back on a US Navy Destroyer while out in the Sea of Japan. Asahi nearly lost her balance and I steadied her.

“What's going on!?” she cried out.

“It's most likely Mushima, one of those three strange men that are with Tatetsuki. He's locked his ship onto yours.”

“Mimisaka!?”

“He's right, my lady! My poor outer hull has been scratched!”

“A scratch!? YEEEEEEK!”

I had to admit, that girl could run when she really wanted to.

But I let her go regardless. There were things that needed to transpire, and as much as I wanted to go and beat the ever-loving life out of Mushima, I had to let things take their course.

Where I would interfere, however, would be afterwards.

I found Goghei in the middle of shaving his head, ridding himself of the hair that grew in suddenly during his transformation. It made me kinda envious in that he could get long hair so quickly and easily.

“Hey, Gar-kun!” called out Sasami as she ran up to me. Washu followed behind her at a more sedate pace with a smile. “Why didn't you do something about Mushima? I mean, you could have at least warned us, right?”

I smiled down at my little sister. “Sometimes, Sasami-chan, I need to let things be. After all, Tenchi needs to become his own man. Haven't you noticed that I tend to outshine Tenchi?”

Sasami thought about it for a moment. “Yeah, you have kinda taken charge a lot.”

I nodded. “Well, the Japanese people tend to be very modest, even despite their immense sense of pride. But in America, we're taught to stand tall, stand *out*, be ambitious, and not to settle for smaller things when better things are available. Now, I'm not saying that our way is better – in fact I think a lot of my countrymen can learn to be a little more humble. But for some, like me, shining so brightly as to overwhelm those that surround us comes as naturally as breathing. And for that reason, I must set aside myself as a whole to allow Tenchi his chance to bloom. After all, a flower does well in the light, but it takes a very hardy plant to blossom under an unrelenting light.”

Sasami nodded solemnly at that. “But Gar-kun... it would be nice if you could learn to not shine so bright.”

I smiled again. “I know, Sasami. Believe me, I know. It's kinda hard to be something I'm not, though. I know people like me better when I am quiet and mild... but it really isn't me.”

Sasami then reached over and hugged me, leaving a kiss on my cheek. “People like that do not want to know the real Garrick.” She then sighed. “I guess it can't be helped.”

“Guess not,” I agreed. I then looked over to Washu. “Nothing to add?” I asked impishly.

Washu gave me a mildly annoyed look. “Why do you think I always meddle in things?”

“Because you have a tendency to do so,” I shot back at her with a grin.

Washu sniffed with mock-disdain. “Well, I know when I'm not wanted!” She then gave me a sidelong look. “Although, I do sense there was something else you wanted.”

I nodded. “Gotta talk to Goghei. Preferably alone if you guys don't mind.”

Washu smiled knowingly. “Sure thing. C'mon, Sasami. We should probably get started on dinner anyhow.”

“Okay. See you later, Gar-kun!” called back Sasami as she waved goodbye.

I waved back and then went to distract Mihoshi. Easy enough – I simply told her Sasami needed help with dinner. Task accomplished, I then sat down with Goghei, who gave me a curious look.

“I apologize for dismissing your help so suddenly, Goghei. If it will make up for it, I'll go ahead and take Mihoshi's place.”

Goghei nodded amiably. “I must say, I have been curious about meeting you. Things were kind of hectic before and you were rather busy.”

I nodded in turn. “Sasami-chan is right. I do need to do a better job of keeping my head down. Even when I play in the background I tend to steal the show.”

“Is it really that important for you to not be yourself?”

“It is important that Tenchi learn to stand up with pride even amid adversity. Make no mistake about it, Goghei – he will, in time, have a crown that will rest heavily on his troubled brow. But while he may be able to put that off for thousands of years, he will, in the meantime, intend to stay on Earth. However, with all these women after his heart, children will eventually come. And when they do, the eyes of everyone in his hometown will focus on him, and the people will whisper amongst themselves. While people will not say it to his face, they will ridicule and bully those closest to him – his children.”

Goghei blinked hard at that revelation. “I see what you mean. In that case, it really is imperative that he become more assertive.”

I nodded once more. “That aside... introductions. My name is Garrick Grimm, adoptive son of Lady Funaho of House Masaki of Jurai.”

“My name is Goghei. I am but a humble monk on pilgrimage.”

“A pleasure to make your acquaintance, Goghei.”

“As it is for me, Mr. Grimm. What brings you to me, if I may ask?”

“Of course... Goghei, please take no offense at my brusque wording... but you must realize that Lady Asahi is not stupid.”

“Eh?” replied Goghei, nonplussed.

“She knows that you're a Gagutian,” I said. When his clueless expression persisted, I clarified even further: “As such, she also knows about the Gagutian beast-man state.”

You could almost hear a gong ringing somewhere as Goghei's eyes shot wide open in shock, horror, and mortal embarrassment. But then, the gears in his head began to turn.

“But... she's not scared of me... in fact, she's never shown any fear of me at all... not even when I saved her from that bear so long ago... even though her father told her those horrible things about men turning into monsters...”

I nodded, a small smile on my face. “Indeed, Goghei. She has absolutely no fear of you at all. So, you should not hold any fear in your heart of her reaction towards you. Now, go ahead and finish shaving. I'll take care of the clippings.”

I picked up the vacuum cleaner, a simple canister model, and marveled at how mundane it was. With all the incredible technology that surrounded us you would think that they would have come up with some interesting ways to innovate the vacuum cleaner. Instead, it was no different from vacuum cleaners on Earth. It wasn't even cordless. It seemed to have pretty decent suction, though.

“Why would you tell me this?” said Goghei all the sudden.

I sighed. So much for being inscrutable. “Because, Goghei, maybe I'd just like there to be somewhat fewer misunderstandings between a man and a woman. So much pain in life could be avoided if men and women would simply confront each other rationally instead of trying to dance on eggshells around issues that seem to be made of explodium.”

Goghei nodded sagely. "Indeed. It is wise to confront an issue directly before it grows too large to be avoided. But what if a woman you desire takes exception to such a confrontation?" I shrugged as I pushed the floor-tool of the vacuum around, pulling up the loose hair.

"A little bit of it depends on how you present the issue. Can't be a boore about it, but sometimes there's just no sugar coating a bad situation. But even so, if a woman takes it with a generally poor attitude... then I hate to say it, but such a woman may not be suitable relationship material. Particularly if the issue centers on her and she has no intention of compromising or changing her ways. No matter how much you may care for her, the best thing to do is to just cut your loses. I've seen it happen to more than one acquaintance of mine."

"I see," said Goghei. "Have you had many such problems yourself?"

I shrugged again. "Sort of. One in particular right now is a very young girl named Yuki Mihara. She wants to be my wife, but the reality is that she's far too young. Not so much the age difference, but literally she is too young! And she will not be dissuaded from pursuing me. Thus far, I've managed to convince her to wait until she is at least of a proper marriageable age. However, so great is her desire to be with me that she stowed away on this trip of ours despite warnings of it being too dangerous for her. So, I forced another compromise on her."

"That being?"

"Hellacious training. Every day, she trains under body-breaking strain and hones her skills for several hours at once, and then drinks a nano-machine infused restorative to heal and replenish her body so she may begin again. With any luck, by the time we reach the end of this journey she will be, at the very least, my own equal in swordsmanship."

"At least she is willing to accept compromise."

I nodded. "At least... for now. But she honestly worries me that one day she will demand too much, too soon. And I hate breaking a girl's heart." No more was said on the matter as we finished our respective tasks.

I came back to the *Hinase* with dinner bento in hand. Yuki came first and I had to quickly set down the bento before she tackled me. And tackle me she did, hitting me like a thrown sack of potatoes.

"Whoof!" I cried out as she knocked me to the deck. Suddenly, her face was up in mine and I thought she was about to kiss me, but then she seemed to think better of it and instead leaned down to whisper softly in my ear.

"I missed you."

I smiled and rewarded her with a kiss on her cheek. "Missed you too, little princess." Yuki pulled back, blushing slightly, but otherwise didn't move. "Ah, so are you gonna get up?"

Yuki only giggled, soft and girlish as she ought to be. In a way, I hope she never really loses this part of herself. It is just so endearing to me.

I smiled and rolled my eyes. "Of course," I said as I began to lever myself up. That took a little more work than it would have before. Yuki had packed on a bit of muscle and I could feel the added heft in her tiny frame. I shifted Yuki over to a bridal carry and looked her over with a critical eye. Her limbs did have a little more substance to them. It wasn't enough by any stretch to be considered aberrant. Rather, she had taken on the dimensions of a very athletic young girl.

I then looked over to Minagi, who was returning the look with amusement.

"Sorry, I'd give you a hug, except it seems someone wants to monopolize me."

As soon as the words left my lips, Yuki harumphed, grabbed ahold of my neck, and began to *climb* over my shoulder. Once she was up and over, she then placed her knees to my ribs and squeezed while wrapping her arms carefully around my neck.

“Here you go, nee-san,” chirped Yuki. “Now we can both get a little bit.” Minagi laughed delightedly as she came up and wrapped us both in a hug.

If I had any doubts or concerns on if this odd relationship between the three of us would work out, that right there squashed it flat.

That evening, I had my two ladies bathe and settle into bed earlier than usual. Quick to pick up on the change of pace, Minagi called me on it. I simply smiled and said it was a surprise. However, once they were all settled Yuki couldn't contain her impatience any longer.

“Gar-kun! What's going on! We never go to bed this early!”

I smiled and chuckled at her. “Just give me a second, Yuki-chan. I need to get something real quick.” I then twiddled with my C-pod and the door to my C-space materialized next to the door to Minagi's closet. I went in and didn't take very long – I had a very clear idea of what I was after and I knew exactly where I had left it. With the navy-blue book with a fuzzy seagull silhouette in hand I went back to Minagi's quarters and dismissed the door.

“This book,” I said as I began to make my way to onto Minagi's bed, this time opting to settle in between my two ladies, “is one of my most treasured memories of my childhood. It was a favorite book of my mother's and it was one of the very first books she gave to me. Unfortunately, the book itself fell apart at the binding long ago. But what mattered to me was the memories of reading the book, alone, at peace, and with a pot of tea to drink through the night. It is one of the few books in my collection that has the distinction of being read over and over again.”

Minagi smiled, both serene and joyous at this revelation. But Yuki... Yuki had shed all her excitement from earlier and took on an open-mouthed reverence as she stared at the book, no doubt marveling at how such a simple little thing could give me such contentment and happiness.

And so, I opened the book and began to read out loud the book, *Jonathan Livingston Seagull*.

Yuki fell asleep halfway through and Minagi touched my shoulder to stop me.

“We'll finish the rest tomorrow,” she said. I nodded with a smile and slid a bookmark into place before closing the book and passing it to Minagi so she could set it on the night stand. As we snuggled down under the covers together, she whispered in my ear.

“I feel it bears repeating: I always felt you would make a good father. Now I know you will be a perfect father.”

“Hardly anyone is perfect. I know I'll screw up sometimes.”

“Probably. But you will admit it. And you will make up for it. That puts you far ahead of the crowd... and I have known many men in my life.”

I chuckled softly. “Surely not as well as you have gotten to know me.”

Minagi chuckled as well. “No. Out of them all, you were the only one who was both gentle and strong enough.” I then felt her lips nibble playfully at my ear. “Sleep now, love. We can always talk more tomorrow.”

I certainly couldn't argue the point. Instead, I gave her one last squeeze and began to let myself drift, content in the gentle sound and warmth of my two ladies softly breathing at either side of me.

We still took our time in approaching Ryuten. Even with the enemy knowing that we were coming, Washu felt that it was better to be safe and take our time than sorry and blasted into sub-atomic particles.

That was just fine by me, because that meant more time training Yuki.

Yuki had been growing stronger. Immensely so. She was already at the point where her classmates would notice a huge difference – not only in appearance, but also in her strength, speed, and grace.

Between myself, Minagi, and Sasami, Yuki was turning into quite the martial artist. I began to watch her closely and saw that even in the most basic of day-to-day rituals she was starting to move like a dancer and a fighter.

That combined with the constant pressure we kept on her with her studies would ensure her a spot as the star of her class.

But, I had decided that we could go ahead and taper off on the physical conditioning. Any more would be pushing Yuki's body to unhealthy levels of strain, and we needed to focus more on skills regardless. I shifted her intellectual pursuits to the mornings preceding her calisthenics routine. Although, with her in the throes of adolescence, I found that I needed to mildly caffeinate her to get her going. Such were the pains of growing, and at Washu's suggestion I had been keeping a photo-journal of Yuki's progress to help me keep track of her growth.

I was glad that I had – Yuki had begun growing at an almost frightening pace. Before our trip started there had been little besides cosmetic differences to distinguish her gender. But recently, her chest had begun to fill out, her hips began to widen, and her waist began to stretch along with her arms and legs. The thing is that, day-to-day, you wouldn't notice it. However, looking back over the pictures from two weeks ago, the difference was striking.

Yuki was going to be one of the lucky ones that didn't have an awkward looking gawky phase. It was happening all at once, and it was all thanks to the restoratives that Washu had prescribed. They had the effect of supplying Yuki's developing body with everything it desired for even and steady growth.

Honestly, it was fascinating. Watching Yuki grow from a clinical standpoint is the stuff that biology and medical students write papers and theses about – the changes the body goes through, shifting from child to adult, make up for a fascinating processes of metamorphosis – particularly for a female! The human body completely reconfigures itself to support, what is in essence, a parasitic life form – to nurture its development through many early stages until it can be fully self-sufficient.

At the same time, it was frightening because this all played into reproduction. The the ebb and flow of the hormones that drove her development caused Yuki to alternate between brazen and demure as she struggled with some very base and primal desires. One moment she would turn a grappling session with me into a bid for a makeout session, the next she would realize what she was doing and go as red as a cooked lobster. The only thing that would keep her from being *mortally* embarrassed was my acceptance of the circumstances – it was what it was, so long as she worked towards better self-control.

The only reason she hadn't started lashing out at Minagi was because, fortunately, Yuki didn't really see her as competition. Just a fellow sister that would gladly lend a hand when things got tough. Social survival mechanisms at their finest. The only comparison I could draw in the animal kingdom was a pride of lions.

I knew, deep inside, that when the time came and we started having children, they would not simply be Yuki's children or Minagi's children... they would be our children, regardless of whose womb they were born from.

For now, though, we trained Yuki, shifting the focus more to skills than strength. And seeing her thrive happily in this setting not only raised my hopes... it warmed my heart closer to the woman she was striving to become.

The next two weeks had a comforting routine to them, different from that before we arrived at Yatsuka.

I woke Yuki, got us fed, and started her on homework and mental exercises. We would keep at it until lunch, at which point Minagi took over for Yuki's swordplay lessons. Eventually, Sasami would arrive with a dinner bento for us, and then Yuki would begin her staff lessons.

Sometimes, Minagi and I would watch, marveling at Yuki's progress and the grace of her movements.

Sometimes, instead, Minagi and I would sneak off and make love in some quiet corner of her ship.

Either way, after Sasami would leave, we'd all bathe and then bed down together, and I would read a story from my library until Yuki fell asleep. While *Jonathan Livingston Seagull* had resonated with Yuki at a deep and profound level, there were others as well. Works by authors like Diane Duane, Piers Anthony, Anne McCaffrey, Mercedes Lackey, Lemony Snicket, Gary Poulson, and even some Isaac Asimov and Robert A. Heinlein. I even read some of the great stand-alones from my memories of school. *Maniac McGee* reminded Yuki intensely of myself – of someone always on the run, always trying his best to smile despite how much hurt he held in his heart, and how much he needed a family to belong to. *The Giver* painted a horrifying picture of just how evil a 'perfect world' could be. *Howl's Moving Castle* was a window into a fantastic world that showed just how badly things can go if you always ran from your problems... and the rewards that could come if you faced them unflinchingly.

At times, Yuki would ask to read a book to herself. At others, she asked me to read them aloud, saying that she loved to hear my voice.

For a time, I felt almost like I was in heaven, being in this little microcosm of just Minagi, Yuki, myself, and sometimes Sasami.

And then Washu came and popped the bubble.

“Okay, Washu-chan, we're here,” I grumbled as Minagi and I trudged into the lounge on *Mimisaka*. “Now what's so important that we gotta hide it from Sasami-chan and Yuki-chan?”

Washu turned and gave me a level look. “Gar-kun, Minagi-chan, I've been talking about it with everyone else here, and we all feel that it would be best to make sure that Sasami-chan and Yuki-chan are safely out of the way when we arrive at Ryuten. To that end, I am proposing that we put them to sleep for several days and leave them on *Mimisaka*.”

I sighed and looked to Minagi, who gave me a concerned look in kind.

“Well, I can't lie and say I didn't see this coming.”

Ryoko shot upwards in anger. “You mean to say that if none of us had said something about this then you would have allowed Yuki-chan into this situation!?”

“Adversity is growth, Ryoko,” I replied evenly. “Yuki-chan has committed herself to this path and the best I can do for her is to facilitate it as best as possible. Besides, if the situation ever showed any signs of getting too hot, there's always this.” And with that, I twiddled briefly with my C-Pod and summoned my door.

“Your C-Space?” asked Ryoko.

Washu snapped her fingers. “That's a perfect idea, Gar-kun. We can use his C-Space to keep the girls while they sleep. Not only will they be safer there than anywhere else, but we'll still have easy access to it as long as Gar-kun's around.”

I nodded at that. “It would be the best thing. It will even allow us a three-pronged attack between *Mimisaka*, *Hinase*, and Ryo-Ohki. Heck, if things *really* go to shit we can use it as an ad hoc life raft.”

“But Dear Brother, aren't things supposed to go well in the end?” asked Ayeka.

I nodded. "They are, Dear Sister, but while we do have temporal momentum on our side, we also have the Butterfly Effect to consider. And I *really* don't want to tempt Murphy's Law into striking in an undesirable fashion."

Asahi suddenly stomped her foot in anger. "If you know so much and you want things to go so well, then why don't you tell us what's going on!?"

I gave Asahi a sharp look as I turned the idea over in my head. Would there really be any harm in telling them? What could go wrong? Would I deny them of any real growth as people? I sighed. I wanted to be careful, but in a ways I wasn't doing everyone else any favors. If the Butterfly Effect struck then they would need to be able to recognize it as soon as possible.

"Alright then," I said at last. "But understand this: knowing what's coming will probably not make this go any easier for us. There are complications along the way that we will need to account for, and even then we will need to have our plans be flexible enough to account for the Butterfly Effect. Does everyone here understand?"

As I looked around, I got nods from everyone present.

I nodded and sighed once more before carrying on. "Washu-chan, I hate to say this, but this whole situation is kinda your fault to begin with."

"WHAT!?" screeched the mad genius. "How so!?"

"Remember you used to have a colleague named Yume? Tiny little thing, looked even younger than you, long fuzzy ears, and crazy looking amber eyes?"

Washu stroked her chin thoughtfully. "I do. Always wondered where she got to after all these centuries."

"Well, when you two got plastered in a bar, you made a bet to see who could take down the Empire of Jurai first." Ayeka just about went thermonuclear right there, but Tenchi and Ryoko were pretty quick in restraining her so I could continue uninterrupted. "You just don't remember at the time because apparently you were even more pickled than you realized."

Washu had the decency to look sheepish. "Eh-heh-heh... Well, it was back in my younger days... I was just a couple thousand years old at the time..."

"But what does this have to do with my father and I?" asked Asahi pleadingly.

"Don't fret, little carpenter bee," I soothed. "I'm getting there. Anyhow, Yume knew that with Jurai's Navy she wouldn't stand a chance, so she did some research and learned a very important, but basic fact about Jurai's trees: that a Royal Tree of a senior ranking can subjugate trees of junior rankings. If Yume could gain control of a single Second Generation Royal Tree, then her bid for conquest becomes a curb stomp in that she will only have to fight a handful of ships with all the rest of Jurai's Navy on her side."

"My word, it would be a disaster!" gasped Ayeka. "But how would she do something like that? Even if she could bond with a Royal Tree, it still has its own will, and it would never permit itself to be used in such a fashion."

I nodded. "Usually. But apparently a long time ago someone on Ryuten made a record of all the secrets about the Royal Trees... including how it is possible to subjugate one's will through an artificial means. That record is in a data node hidden right here on this very ship."

I then turned to Asahi. "This ship, while the outer hull was carved on Ryuten, has a central unit that is implicitly of Juraian make. And that, Asahi Takebi, is why these people have such a vested interest in you."

Asahi looked absolutely stunned as she sat back heavily into her seat.

I then looked to everyone else and carried on. "Now, that's just the broad strokes. Now for some details. Mushima dies on Ryuten after he arrives. Rather than be healed of his injuries, he commits seppuku, after a fashion. There is nothing we can do to save him as it's already happened."

However, before he died he gave his brother, Hishima, a data crystal containing all his experience and knowledge. This includes the data collected during his fight with you, Goghei. If you go into a fight with Hishima, do so with that in mind.”

“Yume herself is sealed within Bizen.” Everyone took a breath to say something all at once, but I held a hand up to forestall the commentary. “Don't even ask – I have no idea because it was never covered in the manga. Suffice to say, no matter how she pulled that stunt off, it has been most effective in hiding her involvement in this scheme. Only someone highly familiar with her work would be able to tell from the three men she created, and even then only after you've had a chance to autopsy the remains... if they were ever killed and left remains.”

Washu snorted. “That's Yume to a tee. If she doesn't want you to know she has a hand in something then you'll never even have a clue unless you get real lucky. But what does this mean for us?”

“Good question. Yume hasn't committed any real crimes thus far except for conspiracy against the Empire of Jurai, and that can be arbitrated away. With the exception of Mushima, no one has really been hurt yet, and honestly I'd like to keep it that way.”

“But why would you want to do that?” asked Ryoko. “I mean, she's doing this all as part of some wager.”

“She'd make a good ally if we ever needed someone to back up Washu-chan in the mad genius department. And honestly I'd rather have someone as dangerous as Yume as a friend rather than an enemy.”

Washu nodded. “He's got a point. While Yume and I had our disagreements in the past, she was definitely someone I could respect and work with.” She then sighed happily as a giddy grin blossomed on her face. “ohhh it will be so nice to work with a proper genius again!”

I leaned over to Washu with a sour-yet-bemused look on my face. “Oi, I thought I was a proper genius.”

Washu gave me a fond smile. “You are, but you need a few thousand years before you can even be a proper assistant.”

I snorted at that and resumed my previous train of thought. “Anyhow, at some point we'll need to figure out how to get her out. The information for that is stored within the data node, but it's sealed by the four guardian beast statues by the central computer. I'd like to spare Asahi's heart by *not* destroying them as they're a memento of her mother.

“But we can figure that out later. There is still one other important thing I must reveal.”

I then turned to Minagi. “Minagi, they have your father's Hielzein-S sword.”

A series of emotions played out on Minagi's face until she finally settled on an incandescent rage as her hair began to levitate around her in a very Miyazaki-esque fashion.

“I'll kill them,” she snarled.

“No,” I said with a firm, but gentle finality.

It was like throwing a switch as Minagi went from enraged to baffled. “What?”

“For keeping this from you, I shall take it upon myself to return your Father's stolen property to you.” Minagi gave me a very puzzled look, but then caught on to what I was saying.

“You... You knew all along.”

I nodded.

“You could have told him.”

I nodded.

“Why didn't you?”

“He would never have been able to take it back. How so when Hishima was able to take it by force in the first place? Granted, he used you as a hostage while you were helpless, but in his state at

the end of his life the most he would have done was gotten himself killed.” I then went to Minagi and gently cupped her face in my hand. “Besides, he said he passed everything on to me. That would have included his sword, so it would fall to me to retrieve it. And once I do... I feel it better belongs in the hands of the woman he gave to me, instead. Who better than she of his blood to wield it, my beloved?”

“You shouldn't.” Minagi whispered as tears built up in her eyes, her hands clasping mine to her face.

“I will, because I love you.”

“But how can you do it where my master failed?”

I grinned my evil grin. “Did you forget already? I'm a cheating bastard. He'll never see me coming.” Minagi suddenly threw her head back and laughed ruefully, and then pulled me into an embrace.

“You never stop giving me reasons to love you.”

“And I hope I never do,” I replied as I hugged her back. We let each other go, save for keeping our arms linked together as we turned to everyone else. “Anyhow, that's pretty much everything. Tenchi?”

“Yes?” asked the teenage boy uneasily.

“You need to take charge for the next part. Now that I've disseminated what I know, it's up to the rest of us to come up with a plan of action.”

Tenchi looked to say something about it, but then the expression on every girl's face (as well as the monk's) caught his eyes. Tenchi then sighed as he realized what he was supposed to be doing: being a leader.

With that, he plunged on in, head first.

We stood outside the massive tree that held the complex that *Hinase's* sensors told us was hidden inside while Washu hacked the security on the door.

Everyone fidgeted nervously around me, asking each other for their reassurances. I looked to Minagi and smiled. She smiled back.

“Here we go!” chirped Washu happily as she finally gained access and with a great rumble of wheels on rails, the doors began to part for us.

As the natural light filled the room, overwhelming the dim ambient light inside, it fell upon a single jail cell at the far end of the space.

Nomori Takebe stood inside, gripping the bars of his cell.

Without a word, I went charging inside despite Nomori's pleas for me to wait.

And then the forcefield snapped up around me.

Just as planned.

“Welcome all!” called out a balding, stoutly built bear of a man with mutton chops girding his equally stout and smiling face. Wearing elaborately decorated robes reminiscent of the Juraian style, this man could only be Tatetsuke. “I'd like to take a moment to express my deepest gratitude to you for so generously delivering Asahi right into my hands.”

His smile suddenly faltered as he noticed something was off.

“Why are you smiling?” said Tatetsuke, angry and a bit uneasy.

“I'm afraid you've got the wrong person.” I tweaked my C-pod and suddenly the holographic disguise of Asahi fell away around me. “Allow me to introduce myself,” I said with a cheerfully saccharine voice. “I am Garrick Grimm and I am your absolute worst nightmare given form.”

Tatetsuke's face went purple with rage. I didn't care, I was too busy readying the next part of my stunt – unslinging the heavy-duty shorting probe from my back and stomping the grounding contact into the deck.

“Where... IS... ASAHI!?”

“Stop,” I said calmly as I slipped on a set of welding goggles and hefted the device. I had to stifle a laugh because they actually did, giving me bewildered looks. As it was, I was grinning like a lunatic as I then said, “Hammer time!”

I think I heard Tenchi yell some sort of wounded imprecation just as I rammed the shorting probe into the forcefield.

Washu-chan assured me that it would be safe to use the shorting probe no matter how much energy was stored in the force field. Nonetheless, I had braced myself for what I thought was the worse.

Let's just say that it made a light and sound that I will gladly tell all my descendants that, no matter how powerful I may be, I would never willingly want to experience that far up close again.

Ever.

“Holy shit,” I said fervently once I could see again.

As I pulled off the goggles I was witness to an altogether strange tableau.

Mushima was passed out, flat on his back, and had wisps of smoke curling from his form at various spots. Tatetsuki was on his side and holding his head, groaning as though someone had whacked him upside the head with a billy club.

The only one left able-bodied was Takashima, who was fixated on me with a snarling, guttural growl.

“YOU!!!” he finally managed.

I barely had time to get my two swords out, dropping the shorting probe where I stood – it had served its purpose.

Takashima is not particularly fast.

He is not particularly smart.

What he was, though, was relentlessly powerful.

Good thing I'm made of tough shit.

I didn't have the power to counter his blows effectively, but I could block and parry just fine, even though they rattled me down into my very guts.

“I'LL HOLD HIM OFF!” I yelled back at the others. “STICK TO THE PLAN!”

“Right!” I heard Tenchi call back. We actually came with several contingencies. And right away, Tenchi set one into action. “Minagi, go for Nomori! Mihoshi, get those restraints on Mushima! Washu-chan, treat Tatetsuki! Goghei, help Garrick! Ayeka, shields!”

The moment Goghei stepped into the fray I fell back, sheathing my blades and unslinging the second device on my back – a one-terawatt pulse-laser courtesy of Washu, although I engineered the idea.

Laser weaponry in the galaxy by and large was what revolver pistols were to the American Frontier – readily available and the great equalizer. The science behind them was considered elementary, and many shops of varying degrees of workmanship made them. There were even quite a few one-offs out there, some of which were considered highly valuable and were watched for eagerly in collection shows and exhibitions.

Raiden's Toothpick might be one of them, someday.

It resembled a long-rifle. The reason for this was two-fold. For one, it acted as a visual aid to help aim the weapon – it was certainly powerful enough to be considered a sniper rifle. For another, it was potent enough for you to want to make damn sure there was nothing obstructing the beam so close to you. The flashback would be fatal for *me* at such distances as I'd wind up being flash-cooked. With the 'safe distance' provided by the barrel, an accident like that would *only* severely maim me.

Indeed, lesson one of handling Raiden's Toothpick was making damn sure that my firing line was clear.

Directly behind the barrel was, of course, the emitter assembly... which was enshrouded by a bank of capacitors. Having them so close to the emitter was for the best. The circuits for that connection had to be made of some seriously dense metal, and it was heavy enough with just the components. Best to keep the circuit path as short as possible, regardless.

The power cell itself was mounted in the butt stock to make it easier to handle, and had enough power for about sixty discharges.

Each pull of the trigger discharged one of the seven capacitors. It took five seconds for a capacitor to charge, and that time grew with the number of capacitors charging. If I discharged all seven in rapid succession then the entire bank would take about forty seconds to recharge.

In a fire fight, forty seconds is almost an eternity. This was definitely not a weapon you would use lightly, but then the power rating should have been indication enough if you know what a one terawatt laser can do. The kicker was the length of the pulses. Most high-power pulse lasers back on Earth only fire for a few picoseconds.

Raiden's Toothpick fired for a full tenth of a second with every pulse.

"Hey, asshole!" I called out, suddenly halting the duel between Goghei and Takashima as they both shot me confused looks. "I may be the type to shoot a man in the back, but today ain't that day."

I pulled the trigger. The laser beam with its insane intensity plasmified the air along the way with a sizzling and ear-ringing crack not unlike a lightning strike. Takashima howled and fell, his hands going to the molten and smoldering remains his right hip.

Mihoshi pounced on Takashima quickly, securing him with GP's highly effective nanomachine fluid restraint that made him look like he was sitting in a giant sphere of lime jello.

"I did it!" cried out Mihoshi happily as she started bouncing around.

"Everything okay?" called out Tenchi.

"Good over here," I called out, "thanks to Goghei."

"I'm in good health as well," called the Monk.

"It seems like we've won," said Ayeka cheerfully.

"Well, don't count your chickens until they've hatched," chided Washu. "We still have to get to Bizen. You said that Bizen should be at the bottom of this shaft, right?"

I nodded. "As near as I can figure."

"Who... Who are you people?" groaned Hishima as he began to come to once more and found himself already encased like Takashima. I looked to Tenchi and nodded.

Tenchi nodded back and stepped forward. We had been over this before.

Spread your wings, Otouto-kun.

"I am Masaki Tenchi of Earth. I am the Grandson of Prince Yosho Masaki Jurai by direct birth. I am the beloved of Princess Ayeka Masaki Jurai and of the Pirate, Ryoko Hakubi. I have the favor of the great genius, Washu Hakubi, and of Tsunami, the Goddess of the Trees.

"I know of your plan. I know of your master. I am here, with my friends and my family, to put an end to this insanity."

Hishima bowed his head. "So you have..."

Well done, Otouto-kun. Well done.

We waited for the Juraians to arrive. They did not disappoint.

As per my recommendation, they arrived by way of the Emperor's ship, *Kirito*. This brought me a good deal of relief since if anything were to go wrong concerning Bizen, then the Emperor's First Generation Tree would be able to override the subordinate Second Generation Tree.

For this reason, the unbonded First Generation Trees are guarded most carefully of all by the Juraians. If one were to fall into someone else's hands as Bizen had, then the only being in existence that could possibly override it would be Tsunami herself.

Of course, we still had that ace as well. Granted there was the incredible chance that Tsunami would turn a blind eye to the affair, but I doubted it. It was not in her character to do so. Regardless, though, I felt it better to do what we can to help ourselves first before we wind up troubling the Goddess – she did, after all, want Sasami-chan to have as normal a childhood as possible.

First to show up were the guards, securing the scene for the royals to come.

And then came Seto Kamiki Jurai and Funaho Masaki Jurai. While everyone went to have words with the two, I stood back and waited patiently.

“Mother! Grandmother! I'm happy to see you, but I must admit I was not expecting you.”

“Oh? And who did you expect, my darling grandson?” asked Seto with a grin.

I shrugged. “To be honest, perhaps some sort of magistrate.”

Funaho chuckled. “Perhaps in any other case, but we are dealing with the theft of a Royal Tree. As the Minister of Intelligence, this situation all but demands my personal and undivided attention.”

“Ah, point,” I conceded.

“And what of you, Grandson?” said Seto. “It is not like you to linger in the backdrop like this.”

I smiled. “I'm trying to give Tenchi room to be his own man.”

“Heeehhh?” said Funaho. “And what will you do once he is his 'own man' as you put it.”

My smile never wavered. “Then I suppose I'll just have to build myself a nice, cozy home in the boughs of Tenju. By the way, where's Misaki-sama?”

Seto grinned. “She is dealing with the Protector of Ryuten. Apparently she feels he hasn't been doing his job well enough to have let shenanigans like this gone on right under his nose, as it were. Honestly, she would love to be here to meet you, Grandson, but as you may understand, this is an affront to her as the Head of the Imperial Bodyguard.”

I nodded my head sagely. “I see. Grandmother, would you be so kind as to relay to her my sympathies? I myself find few things so much more irritating than a colleague's incompetence.”

Seto chuckled. “I am certain she'll appreciate your sympathies, Grandson.” She then turned and called out, “Now then, on to business!”

“Indeed,” concurred Funaho as she removed a lovely wooden bracelet from somewhere within her robes. “My Husband has been good enough to provide me with a subordinate key to his Kirito. While it is not a Master Key, it should suffice in gaining command authority over Bizen. Tenchi, will you lead us to where Bizen is being kept?”

“Sure thing!” piped up Tenchi.

After a trip down the shaft using the hidden lift Washu had found, we soon found ourselves before the great form of Bizen.

She was a magnificent tree. While Funaho-no-ki was large, yet relatively short, Bizen-no-ki stood tall on a trunk wider than either of my trucks, Scrappy and Scooby. And she was topped off with a massive plume of a canopy, lush and green despite the dim light of this place.

But that only stood to reason, what with the tree drawing off Tsunami's power.

A later moment of fridge logic would bring me to realize that Tsunami cannot track other trees by their tap on her power. She must hear their telepathic voice to do that.

And silenced Bizen had been by the machinery around us. Where most Royal Trees interfaced with their ships through the roots in the containment unit and the lights emitted by their leaves, Bizen had many power and data trunks crudely clamped to her trunk.

We were not simply taking back a Royal Tree. Today, we were freeing a slave.

Washu worked at the machinery, and steadily it began to fall away. Funaho slipped the bracelet onto her right hand and held it out to Bizen.

A clean, white glow emanated from the wooden jewelry and a tone that sounded something like tinnitus hummed in the air.

With a motion so sudden that it was almost explosive, Bizen's uro (a small chamber within the trunk of the tree) opened, spewing sap before it.

Slowly and carefully, a tiny, nude girl stepped from the opening. Her wild looking amber eyes commanded attention as they peered disdainfully from behind her mahogany-colored bangs. Those bangs contrasted, not unappealingly, with the rest of her hair, which was a dirty blonde color and pulled into a pair of gravity defying pig tails. Her long, tufted ears were covered with soft looking mahogany-colored hair as well.

“So,” she said slowly and venomously. “It seems my servants have failed me.”

“Not for lack of trying on their part,” said Funaho diplomatically.

“Is that so?” she seethed, her rage beginning to boil over.

“YES,” I said loudly as I stepped up the middle. I would be damned if I was going to let her throw some temper tantrum, and poor Tenchi didn't have the fire in his belly yet to deal with someone like this. “And I am the reason for their failure.”

If she needed someone to blame, then who better than me?

The girl looked at me with a jaundiced eye. “You are not a Juraian,” she declared. “In fact, you do not come from any of the civilized worlds. Your accent is completely off.” Her glare then sharpened. “What... are... you?”

“I am human, dominant race of colony world 0315. But that's just on the outside. The real kicker is...” I smiled my evil smile. “I am a dimensional displacie from an alternate version of my world that has a metaphysical link to this world. I have known of your plans for several years, Yume... and with my knowledge it has been all too easy to put the kibosh on it all.

“My name is Garrick Grimm, and I am calling off your bet. It's over now, Yume. Let's get you into some clothes and we can discuss what happens next. Minagi! That towel!”

“LIKE HELL I WILL!” snarled Yume.

I turned just in time to see her coming and cursed as she struck me with a right hook that felt like getting nailed with a baseball bat. However, by reflex more than anything else, I got a hand on one of her own.

It was all downhill for Yume from there. Even if she could hit like a freight train, she had little real mass – to make up for that she has to develop the momentum for it, which means her punches need a big wind-up. However, Nikyou is a very effective joint locking hold that renders even the most powerful people immobile. It is something that only a contortionist can get out of.

Yume thrashed and screamed obscenities at me regardless.

“WILL YOU SHUT UP!” I screamed at her at last. That seemed to startle her somewhat and I pressed my verbal assault. “What the hell is wrong with you? Are you trying to get yourself killed!? Besides, do you have any idea how utterly wrong it looks like to make me wrestle a naked girl like this!?”

“WHAT!?” snapped Yume. “I *am* an adult you stupid pervert! My kind doesn't develop until we've been fertilized!”

At that, there were several facevaults all around.

“You know,” deadpanned Washu, “that last statement doesn't help this imagery very much.”

“I don't fucking care anymore!” raged Yume from under my pin. “I've lost everything now! I am completely ruined! Do you have any idea how much this hurts?!”

Washu gave Yume a sorrowfully sober look. “I don't. But he does.”

Yume glared up at me with those raving yellow eyes. “What does she mean?”

I glowered down at Yume and laid it all out for her. I won't repeat it here, it's already been beaten to death. But for Yume...

“But that's not the same!” raved Yume. “I've lost thousands of years of progress!”

“You lost some time,” I snapped back. “No more, no less. Your scientific prowess permits you to extend your lifetime for however long you please, so this is no great loss. You are still a highly respected genius and your knowledge of the Trees of Jurai is now second only to the Juraians themselves.

“I stand before you, a man soon to be adopted into the highest echelons for the Royal Family of Jurai, and I profess that I consider you to be the equal of Washu Hakubi, and someone who I would gladly have at my side in a time of need.”

Yume had stopped struggling as she looked up at me in shock, and so I let her up and stood aside, handing her the towel Minagi had passed to me.

“Is this some kind of pity?” Yume growled softly as she cautiously wrapped the towel around herself.

“I would be lying if I said I had no pity for you,” I said levelly. “But this is not pity. I honestly want you as an ally instead of an enemy.”

“And what of my crimes?”

“What crimes may those be?” asked Funaho. “From what I have gleaned from Bizen's memory thus far, you've committed no real crime against the Throne. Bizen being here no real offense, either. One might even go as far to say that you could have mistakenly thought you had salvage rights, and that would be no real crime... so long as you don't resist while we claim what is rightfully the property of Jurai.”

Yume rolled her eyes. “As if I could now.”

“Very well then. Chief Engineer?”

“Your Highness,” barked a Juraian officer as he snapped to sharp attention.

“Commence preparations to have Bizen extracted. I want progress reports every hour. Make haste.”

“By your command, your Highness.” And with that, the officer began to rattle off a litany of orders.

“Great,” grumped Yume. “So now what?”

Funaho smiled. “We have located your effects and have transported them up to my ship. If you would be amenable to being my guest, I would love to have you. I'm certain you have many interesting stories to tell.”

“Oh, I'm certain that the Minister of Intelligence would love to know what I've been up to.”

Funaho's face fell somewhat. “Yume, I try not to be a terrible person. I understand that being in my position makes this a difficult image to uphold. But I assure you that, while I do wish to debrief you, you will not be mistreated. Garrick has made me promise to extend amnesty to you so long as you cooperate with us.”

Yume gave her an astounded look. “You would do that for him!?”

Funaho smiled gently. “I know it may seem strange... but my step-daughter has been keeping me updated. I have seen recordings of his exploits. He may be, at times, a hard person – stubborn, willful, and overbearing... but he is also one of the most gentle and loving people you could ever wish to meet. And he doesn't want to see you hurt, because he knows what that's like.”

“I hate to interrupt, but there is one other thing I need to take care of before you take her away, Mother. Yume, you once took a weapon, by force, from Master Swordsmith Yakage a long time ago. I must challenge you to take it back.”

Yume shot me a venomous look. “And what right do you have to it?”

“Yakage named me his heir. That would include the Hielzein-S blade you took.”

Funaho blinked. “Minagi, did Yakage really name Garrick as his heir?”

“Ah, yes, he did, but why is that important?”

“This changes things!” said Funaho, a rare excited smile spreading on her face. “Before he disappeared from the court, Yakage was a *landed* noble! If this is true, then you already have land and a title!” Her smile then fell into a thoughtful frown. “But then he should have filed the notarized documents naming you as his successor... I wonder why they haven't shown up yet.”

Washu chuckled nervously. “Ah-heh-heh. That would be my fault.”

I blinked. “And why is that?”

Washu pulled out a beautiful legal document from out behind her back. I am not joking here. The thing was a work of art with its decadently scrolling Juraian calligraphy, the background art of the stationary, and the holography of the official seals that were lined up at the bottom of the document.

Yakage went all out. I can't even imagine how much it must have cost to have this document created. Those characters were definitely inked by hand.

“I felt that with everything else that was going on, you didn't need to be distracted by this.”

I gave Washu a sour look at that, but let the matter go as Funaho took the document from Washu and carefully read it over.

“This document is in order. Congratulations, son. You are a Lord in Peerage with the Noble Houses of Jurai. As Yakage's inheritor, it is your right to decide how we proceed with Yume's crime against you. What is your decision?”

“I wish for this to be decided under single combat until one of us yields.”

Yume crowed. “You challenge me to a fight? You won't stand a chance against Hishima!”

“I'm afraid you're mistaken, Yume. I don't want to fight Hishima or even Takashima, or any other creation of yours. The one I wish to fight is you yourself.”

Yume was speechless as she stared at me in shock, but that slowly turned to an expression of simmering rage.

“Fine then!” she ground out. “We'll work out the time and place later. Just make sure you're ready or else I'll make you wish for death!”

>>Kawai Kenji - Kishi Ou no Hokori

It was a quiet evening. We were all aboard *Hinase* because *Mimisaka* had returned to the docks and Asahi, Nomori, and Tatetsuki had all returned to their homes. Goghei was staying as a guest of Nomori.

We were eating dinner together when Yuki piped up.

“Are you okay, Gar-kun? You're quieter than usual.”

I sighed. “I am kinda troubled... I'm just kinda uncomfortable with the way things have turned out. It's too pat – too easy. I'm used to things being a real struggle.”

“Why? What was it supposed to be like?”

“A lot more drawn out than this. Yume got what she wanted from Asahi's ship and then thoroughly thrashed Yukinojo when it came looking for Mihoshi. Minagi tried to get her father's sword back and nearly got killed in the process, but she managed to save Asahi's ship from being crushed by falling debris when Yume lifted off her makeshift tree ship. Funaho and Misaki showed up along with an entire fleet of Third Generation tree ships, but Yume used Bizen to subvert their control over the fleet. And then there was the showdown between Hishima and Goghei... Goghei forfeited when Hishima adapted to his most powerful attack. But when Hishima then fought Tenchi, Bizen was hurt

during the fight and started to go crazy. Bizen would have destroyed the galaxy, but Tsunami-no-fune showed up and overrode Bizen and all the other tree ships it had taken control of.”

The dinner table was pretty quiet after that.

“I know it's disturbing, guys... but the point is that everything was okay in the end, and we were all better people for it.

“Ryoko, you learned that you honestly do see Minagi as a sister when you donated your blood and marrow to help Washu save her life after she was nearly beaten to death.

“Goghei learned just how deeply he cared for Asahi, and Asahi got over her allergy to men.

“And Tenchi, you became a great leader when Bizen went crazy. You made sure nobody lost their heads when they all would have been justified in their panic and made sure that everyone did what they could to stop Bizen.”

“But what about you and Yuki?” said Tenchi urgently as he got up. “You weren't there in the original version of this time-line. What would have happened then?”

I shrugged at that. “What would have happened happened earlier.”

Tenchi blinked at that, then sat down in his seat, stunned.

Washu, though nodded her head. “You people see his point now? Garrick doesn't dole out information about coming events lightly. He knows just how much of an impact it can have, and that is why he chooses to remain silent at times.

“I want all of you to understand this: we should not make any demands that Garrick reveal anymore than he has. It is far too dangerous, and loathe as I am to admit it, only he can honestly judge what sort of impact his knowledge will have. Do you all understand?”

“I suppose it is for the best,” Ayeka said. “I mean... you would warn us about something when it is in our best interest, will you, Dear Brother?”

I nodded. “Of course, Sister. I will always have everyone's best interests in mind.” And that was no joke. I had already told Washu about that spoiled brat, Garyu, and the utter mind-rape he did to Ayeka. I only hoped that I would be strong enough to fight him when the time came so I could throttle the little bitch-boy myself.

“That's good enough for me,” said Ryoko with a firm nod. “Not a good idea to rock the boat anymore than we have.”

With Ryoko and Ayeka's approval, the others all nodded their heads in agreement.

That night, Yuki surprised Minagi and I.

“Gar-kun, can Sasami-chan and I borrow your C-Space tonight?”

“What for?” I asked.

“She and I wanted to have a little sleep-over party with just the two of us.” She then gave me a nasty little grin. “Also, because I want to give you and Minagi a chance to do it properly.”

I felt my eyebrows go straight to my hairline. “Excuse me?”

“Minagi wants to make a child with you, right?” At my undoubtedly surprised expression, Yuki giggled. “Silly. Sasami-chan isn't stupid. She knows what you and Minagi have been doing when your two sneak off. Don't worry, though. We haven't been watching or anything like that.”

“I would hope not!” I cried out. I then sighed and hunkered down so I was on eye-level with Yuki. “Yuki, look I-”

“Nope!” snapped Yuki cheerfully. “Don't care!” Her expression then turned somewhat more sober as she went on, “I know what you're thinking, Gar-kun... and you're right. I am jealous of Minagi-nee. But that is just the way it is, right? She's old enough, and she ready for this... I'm not old enough... and I'm definitely not ready. I wish I was... but I finally learned... just because I want something doesn't mean I should have it right away.”

Yuki suddenly laughed hysterically. “My friends back in school are hardly gonna recognize me! They'll think that I was kidnapped by aliens and replaced with a clone or something!” She then smiled wistfully up at me. “But that's pretty much what happened... I went to the stars... the old me died... and then the new me was born. But I think it will be okay... even if some of my friends don't like me anymore... I know the person I care about most will always like me, no matter what.

Yuki's smile then split her face. “So go ahead! Make Pictures of Spring with Minagi-nee! Make your first child with her! I'll do my best to help Minagi-nee, and that will help me prepare to have *my* first baby. Just make sure you do a good job, though, or else I'll never forgive you!”

I laughed despite myself. Where the hell had this version of Yuki come from? But then, I guess it's like she said. The old Yuki died out there on Yatsuka... and a new one had sprung forth from the ashes, determined to take on the world and wiser from her earlier mistakes.

I pulled the precocious girl into a hug. “You are one crazy little girl, and I love you for it.”

Yuki hugged me back with a vengeance. “You are my protector and teacher and I love you for it.”

With my arms around her back, I tapped a familiar sequence into my C-Pod and felt the object I needed drop into my hand. As I pulled away from Yuki, I clipped the thin band around her wrist.

“There you go,” I said with a smile. “Twelve hours of limited access to my C-Space. You remember how this works, right?”

Yuki nodded. I then leaned over and gave her a little peck on the cheek. “Give my love to Sasami-chan. This one is for her.” I then gave her another one on the other cheek.

Yuki suddenly kissed me back, sneaking it onto my lips with the swiftness of a snakebite. And then she took off, leaving a trail of girlish giggling in her wake.

I sighed after I couldn't hear her anymore. “Girl is gonna be the death of me, I just know it.”

The next morning I awoke to someone shaking my shoulder. Slowly I opened my eyes to see Minagi looking down at me.

“Gar-kun, Funaho's here!” she whispered urgently.

“Bwwaaaa?” I said, oh so coherently, as I broke out into a huge stretch and the sort of cavernous yawn that earned me the title 'Mouth the Size of Texas' from my mother. And then there was the sound of a coy chuckle.

“Oh my! I've seen some impressive yawns before, but I swear that all of Tenju could have fit into that one.”

“GYAH!” I yelped in surprise, my eyes quickly zeroing in on Funaho.

Minagi had been quite literal in saying that she was 'here'.

“Ahhh...” I said, as my brain began to spool up. “Err... Mother... You do realize I'm not decent under this blanket, right?”

Funaho tilted her head and smiled at me. “And why do you feel this should concern me?”

I blinked at Funaho. “Okay, it's too goddamn early for this.” Throwing modesty into the wind, I threw the covers off and got out of bed, then quickly found my pants and pulled them on. That accomplish, I planted my butt back into Minagi's bed and started rubbing the sleep out of my eyes.

“So, what brings you over here today, Mother?” I asked through another yawn.

Apparently Funaho had froze for a moment. “...Oh! Yes, Yume wanted to see about settling this challenge with you.”

“Yeah, we never did set a date for that. How about later this afternoon?”

“It is already late in the morning. Are you certain that you'll be ready to face her?”

I waved it off. "I've dealt with worse. Nothing like being woken up at oh-my-goddess in the morning to load a few one-thousand-pound torpedoes. You have no idea how thankful I am that I don't have to put up with that malarkey anymore."

Funaho hid her open-mouthed shock with her hand. "I can only imagine." No surprise there. I don't think the Juraians have had to do any sort of real weapons systems maintenance since Tsunami came into their lives. Score one for organic weaponry. "Well, at any rate I'll let Yume know."

"Before you go, Mother, how is Bizen doing?"

Funaho smiled. "Bizen is doing well. She will appreciate your asking after her."

I nodded and suddenly had an odd thought occur to me. "Mother... Since Bizen already has a name... that means that she was already bonded to someone... so if Yume didn't steal her, then how did she get ahold of Bizen?"

Funaho nodded in understanding. "It is a highly unusual situation. I don't blame you at all for being confused on the matter. Bizen belonged to a man who was something of a recluse among the nobility. He passed away of extreme age, far out in deep space where no one could find him."

I nodded in understanding. "No one that is, except Yume."

"Indeed."

And then something else occurred to me. "Wait... Only the person that bonds to a tree may name a tree... I forgot about that when I named Katherine, and she accepted the name... then..."

"She may have already bonded to you. Remember, son, the ceremony is only that – a ceremony. Although that is usually when a tree will make its Master Key, there have been times when it occurred before hand." Funaho looked at me in askance, and I shook my head.

"No, she hasn't yet."

Funaho smiled once more. "Then there is still unfinished business to attend to. At any rate, though, I must be on my way. Prepare yourself well, my son. Washu has already warned me that while Yume is an academic by choice, she also has considerable prowess as a swordsman." She then gave me a wry grin. "Though I suspect you knew that already."

I smiled back at her. "Somewhat. I only ever saw that she was able to stand on even footing with Washu-chan in hand-to-hand combat. Thank you anyhow." My smile then turned a bit nasty. "Forewarned is forearmed, after all."

Funaho grinned back at me. "Indeed. Good luck, my son."

Minagi and I had a light breakfast, then limbered up and warmed up together. Without pausing, we then went through a series of easy drills to get my head in the game. We even went through some scenarios of tactics we thought Yume might employ during our contest.

In the end, though, we were realists about the matter. We knew that there was not much we could do to prepare me for this, except for the more immediate matters.

To that end, Ayeka once more lent me a set of Juraian battle armor, and then showed Minagi how to bind my hair the way she had when I fought Yakagi.

That done, all I had left to do was to choose my weapon. Though I did deliberate for a moment, the choice was clear.

When I arrived back on Ryuten, it was to a remarkable sight: the top of the tree that had held the Shima Brothers facility had been carefully removed and Bizen, along with the containment unit that held the Royal Tree, was slowly being pulled up through the massive trunk with the careful use of tractor beams and anti-gravity devices.

Yume was there as well, watching. Idly, I sidled up next to her.

"What would you have done afterward, Yume?"

“What do you mean?” she asked, arch towards me but seemingly unable to summon any real fury.

“After it was all said and done. After you had toppled the Juraian Empire and had Washu as your willing slave. What would you have done then?”

Yume scoffed harshly. “Would it have mattered? Think about it, kid. If I was so willing to knock over the Juraians so readily, do you think I would have really cared about what happens next?”

I sighed. “I would have hoped so. It's so short-sighted for someone of your caliber.”

“Yeah, well I'm in it for me and no one else. And what I want the most is to monopolize Washu's brilliance.”

I cocked an eyebrow as I gave Yume a sidelong look, but she didn't even bat an eyelash as she kept her eyes on the scene unfolding before us. For all her talk about being 'mature' she sure didn't act the part. She was in desperate need of some humbling.

“So, when do we get started,” I asked.

Yume turned and gave me a vicious little smile. “So eager to get your ass handed to you?”

“You never know,” I answered with a smile of my own. “I just might surprise you.”

“We'll see about that, little boy. Let's get this show on the road.”

The field of battle had already been prepared – a large clearing in the midst of the giant trees of Ryuten. An observation stage had been set up on the far side of the clearing. There everyone waited. My family, including Funaho, as well as Asahi, Nomori, Tatetsuki, and Goghei. Misaki was not present, though. She was still cleaning house with the Protector – an unenviable task if there ever was one. Emperor Asuza was not present, either, but I had been told he would be watching from the comfort of his throne on Kirito. Oddly enough, however, Hishima and Takashima were there on the observation stage.

Yume and I took our positions on the field. She drew her weapon, the Shadow Blade. I drew my own Hielzein-S blade.

“So... you possess one of the Sibling Blades,” said Yume, a hint of intrigue in her voice. “How exactly did you come by that?”

“It was a gift from the descendant of the man that forged these blades,” I explained. “He was a friend of Yoshō, who possessed the other blade and had me pass it on to Tenchi. When I helped free his people of a corrupt magistrate, he learned that Tenchi was not only the Prince's descendant, but that I was regarded as his elder brother. And so, it was felt proper that I possess this blade. In honor of that, I have named this blade Otouto. Tenchi, likewise, has named his Oni-san.”

“So, you're one of those sappy sentimentalists,” sniped Yume.

My brow furrowed as I gave her a hard look. “What the hell happened to you?”

“What do you mean?” snapped Yume harshly.

“You know exactly what I mean, Yume. People don't become this way naturally. We're sentimental for a reason – the ties and bonds of friends and family are part of what makes us what we are. Who destroyed your bonds of family? Who was it that hurt you so horribly that even the thought of having such things are anathema to you now?”

Yume's expression had turned dark. “That... is none of your business.”

Nothing more was said – it was finally time for this duel to begin.

Yume came first in a sidelong charge as she tried to flank me, and very nearly succeeded in doing so due to her small size and speed.

That's alright, I thought to myself as I moved to meet her head on. Let her do most of the moving. She'll tire out eventually.

Our swords met and I was almost surprised at how the shock reverberated up my arms. It was like Takashima all over again, only at least the blows were not so gut-wrenchingly hard.

On second thought she may outlast me, I thought as we traded more blows. She was not only fast, but powerful as well. That tiny frame of hers held an enormous hidden strength. Maybe she had more densely packed muscle fibers, much like a cat does.

And right as the thought of cat-like movements came to mind, Yume suddenly vaulted over my head, spinning like a top with the Shadow blade out and flashing over me like some nightmarishly large food processor. I was barely able to hold that assault at bay.

This was starting to become more than I bargained for. But did I have an ace in the hole? Time to check my hand and find out.

Katherine, are you there?

I felt something alien, but not unpleasant, brush against my mind gently and with the sound of a giggling child.

I'm always watching over my Gar-kun.

I couldn't stop the elation from flooding my heart.

Can you lend me a bit of your strength?

Silly, it's always yours for the taking. You just have to reach for it.

Was it really so simple? I turned inwards as I left my hands to do the work of turning aside Yume's assaults. And suddenly, there it was: an upwelling of pure power that I never really noticed was there. And being freely offered by Katherine, it was all mine for the taking. The only condition being that I be her companion, and she mine, for as long as I live and even unto death.

This was the pact. This was the bond. I took hold of this power and pulled it up until I felt the connection fall into place. And not a moment too soon as Yume darted aside from one of my thrusts.

I had hundredths of a second to react.

I had trained under Yosho for roughly a year, throwing myself into it like a man possessed. To say that the training had borne fruit was an understatement: Yosho had begun to teach me blade catching. Granted we had only done it with wooden swords for safety's sake, and at nowhere near a proper fighting speed...

But here and now, with Katherine's empowerment, I stopped the Shadow Blade cold between the palms of my hands, six inches from my face.

Yume gave me a maddened smile and somewhere I heard some commotion on the observation stage.

"Incredible," she hissed with insane joy. "No one has ever stopped my blade like this before... But not even you can keep it at bay forever!" She then began to press down against me with the Shadow Blade.

Before, Yume's strikes had been brutally hard. She was certainly strong then... but that was not the case anymore. It was time for me to disabuse her of that notion.

I pressed back and Yume's smile faltered as she realized what was going on and redoubled her efforts, but it was in vain. Once I had the clear advantage, I then lifted the blade, and along with it, Yume as well as she held onto it.

"There's no way!" wailed Yume desperately. "I had you dead to rights! Where did you get this strength from all the sudden!?"

"Those bonds you seem to think are so needless?" I asked archly. "They really aren't."

"What?" said Yume, puzzled, but then her face became anguished as the pieces fell together.

"no... I should have KNOWN! OF COURSE THEY WOULD HAVE GIVEN YOU A TREE!"

Yume finally let go and dropped to the ground.

"I yield," she said quietly.

I sighed and carefully set the Shadow Blade aside, and then held my hand out. "May I have the sheath, please?"

Yume looked up at me and made a feral sounding growl that sent a shiver up my spine. And then, too quickly for me to react, she lunged and bit my hand, her sharp little canines digging deeply into my flesh.

I squawked in shock and pain as I tried to pull my hand away. Yume held on, but only for a second. Once she did let go, she giggled hysterically as she licked my blood off her lips.

“HmMMM. Good iron content,” she said with a vicious perversion of coyness. “I hope you don't mind too much, Gar-kun. Even if you have been endowed with the Power of Jurai, you still would have needed some great skill and talent to beat me. That little love bite of mine is just my way of saying how much I appreciate being challenged.”

“SEIZE HER!” came Funaho's voice sharply as several members of the Royal Bodyguard materialized around us.

“NO!” I cried out, giving the guards a sharp cutting gesture. “Don't! It's over now. Yume will leave peacefully... won't you?”

“I shall,” Yume replied. “Here's the sheath,” she said as she tossed it my way and I caught it with my good hand. “I hope the next time you and I meet, Gar-kun, you'll be a little more... amenable.”

The guardsmen let her by, but kept staff weapons trained on her at all times. As Yume called Hishima and Takashima, Funaho approached, shooting Yume evil looks as she did so.

“Are you alright, son?”

“I think so,” I answered honestly. “It's not even hurting all that much, but I'll have Washu-chan take a look at it here in a minute.”

“Are you certain you want to let her get away with that?”

I nodded. “Just a bit of defiance – a final flying 'fuck you' before she retreats. She won't be any more trouble since she got her pound of flesh in the end there.”

“I'm not so certain, son. People like her... tend to show up when they are least wanted.”

“I'll take that chance, mother. As I said before, we'll want her goodwill later.”

Right then, though, I had a horrible feeling in my gut. You know that thing people say about feeling like someone walked over their grave? I've never had anything to liken to it... until now.

Funaho gave me a concerned look. “What is wrong, my son?”

“You know that feeling you get when there's a horrible joke coming up and you just know you're going to be the butt of that joke?” I asked her. Funaho frowned sharply and nodded her head. I nodded back and said, “Yeah, I'm getting that feeling now.”

And right then the entire world seem to lurch *sideways* and I had to struggle to stay standing up.

A horrible cackle filled the air, reverberating off of everything and nothing at once. Looking up to the sky, I saw the image of a huge, overweight man in crimson robes and hideously styled hair and beard that made his head look like an octopus.

“DOCTOR CLAY!?” I cried out in shock.

Clay stopped laughing and looked down at me. Unnervingly, he seemed to have both of his eyes now... and they were filled with an unspeakable darkness.

“You have played with the girls long enough, my little pet! I think you've learned plenty here... time for us to move to the next phase!”

“Capture him, my servants!” called out the twisted scientist as he cast his hands out. Suddenly, the air was filled with discs that bore his mark, and wherever they landed golems of dirt and rock began to form, moaning like ghouls seeking flesh. Right away, the guardsmen were scattered, all overwhelmed by the sudden appearance of enemies.

Tenchi, Tsunami bless his heart, took immediate action.

“Zombie Assault VIP scenario!” he called out authoritatively. “Headshots only! Pair off and seek fortified ground, then regroup! Garrick is the VIP!” Yeah, Tenchi and I had been playing some games. I thought it was honestly kinda funny he liked stuff like Left4Dead and Counterstrike. But then, Valve's stuff always was top shelf.

Clay cackled once more. “You can fight for as long as you wish! I can just keep making more and more golems!”

I slapped my C-pod and called out onto it, “First Cut!” Right away, the weapon was transported out of its subspace storage and into my hands.

I can't tell you how glad I was that Washu got this feature up and running last night.

I dashed the control discs on two golems into shards, causing them to melt into mounds of dirt, then ran to where I had dropped Otouto. I took a second to sheath the blade and looked around.

First I noticed was that Sasami and Yuki had paired off. Sasami's hair was flying free as she wielded her hold-out staff expertly, carving a path in my direction. Yuki, who had Sasami's other hold-out staff, was no slouch either and my heart filled with pride and awe as she moved nearly as gracefully as Sasami, practically dancing through the golems and leaving them as dirt mounds in her wake.

Ryoko and Minagi had paired off immediately and were raining death from above, whittling down on the number of golems. Ryoko looked like she was having the time of her life. Minagi though... she looked righteously enraged.

“This is just like old times, isn't Yume?” cried out Washu gleefully as she fired away with some sort of BFG, taking out an entire group in one shot.

“With that litch crashing the party? More like bad memories!” grumbled Yume as she let loose with a volley of three shots, each one taking out a single golem. “Nice balance. Who designed this laser rifle? You?”

“That's one of Garrick's toys!” chirped Washu like a proud mother.

“Oh really?” I didn't have to look to hear the smile in Yume's voice. Creepy.

“Master!” called out Hishima. “Do we protect the one that humiliated you?”

“You will if you know what's good for you!” screamed Yume caustically.

“So be it. Come, Takashima! The Game's afoot!”

“YOSH!” grunted the larger Shima brother and away they went.

“Goghei!” called out Tenchi. “Get the Takabes and Tatetsuki out of here!”

“But what about Garrick!?” cried out Asahi in alarm.

“This is not your fight!” Tenchi called back.

“But you fought for me!” Asahi fired back.

“ASAHI!” I called out as I opened up more space around me. “We are firmly in Gods and Monsters territory here! Get the hell out of here before you get yourself killed!”

“Asahi will leave,” replied Nomori Takebe. “But only if Goghei stays and fights!”

“Fine!” agreed Tenchi tersely. “Just get someplace safe!”

I looked just in time to catch Asahi giving Goghei a sudden, brief kiss on the lips before running away with her Father and Tatetsuki. This was especially impressive given that Goghei was already in his Beastman state. Befuddled but not distracted, Goghei sided with Tenchi and the two went to work.

“You seem to be a little lonely out here, son,” came Funaho's voice as she gracefully did for two golems trying to sneak up behind me.

“Isn't this situation a little hairy for you to be involved in at this level, Mother?” I asked, a bit surprised.

“You're the one who is in most danger,” Funaho replied with a small, knowing grin. “Besides, it's been too long since I've had this much fun.” Her expression then darkened. “And that bastard is posing a direct threat to you, my son. I shall not permit that to go unanswered.”

I smiled as Funaho and I settled in at each other's backs. “I'm glad you're here, Mother.”

“I am glad to have you, my Son,” she replied.

There was a pop of a sonic boom nearby. I made sure I was in the clear before I stopped to watch Ayeka, who had dropped the princess facade and decided to go to *work*. She was decked out in her own Juraian battle armor and just plain *punching* the golems around us into next week while Mihoshi gave her ranged coverage. In fact, if I didn't know any better....

“Karate?” I asked Funaho.

I could hear the grin in Funaho's voice. “I felt it suited her temperament better than the sword arts.”

I snorted at that. “No kidding.”

Really, I never knew anything about this. Ayeka doesn't take the kid gloves off very often and I'd forgotten that her preferred method of attack is her fists. In fact, she probably finds it embarrassing and unladylike and so I guess she only practices in secret. I'll have to get her to come around somehow, because really there is a certain beauty and grace in the striking arts.

“Your Highness!” called out one of the guardsmen. “There is some kind of interference keeping us from using the teleporters! Work extracting Bizen has been suspended and we are currently fortifying the site as we speak! We can fall back there so we may safely extract His Grace and his company in one of the shuttles.”

Funaho nodded. “Well done, Captain! Open the path! Tenchi, Garrick, we're leaving!”

“Oh, you won't slip away so easily!” Suddenly the earth erupted all around us, accompanied by a shrieking roar that was familiar for some.

“Tsunami preserve us!” gasped the Guard Captain. “Doudo!”

Let me see if I can do this justice. Imagine the ancient precursor of the Kodiak Bear, only the size of a small house and in a shape like a rat. Give it four eyes, two sets of razor-clawed forelimbs, and the biggest attitude problem you can imagine. You know that funny little meme about wasps and just sitting still until they go about their business? Even worse, because if you even have a pulse then *you are* the doudo's business. QED.

And Clay had sent down four of these monstrosities.

“Oh fuck!” I cried out. “TENCHI! SHIT JUST GOT EVEN MORE REAL!!!” Everyone scattered, and rightfully so. Fortunately, this had the effect of drawing the attention of all four doudo away from me, which meant I had just enough time to bring out an equalizer.

I stabbed First Cut into the ground, slapped my C-Pod and called out “Star Spark!”

Plasma weaponry is not easy and it is not cheap. Nonetheless, Washu and I made Star Spark because we figured that having it and not needing it was better than needing it and not having it.

This situation definitely qualified as 'needing it'.

Star Spark was truly nasty. I could even get into trouble for having it. Reason being? Fluorine-based plasma chemistry. This shit made Dioxygen Difluoride look tame by comparison. The good part is that the chemicals decayed so quickly that they were deemed useless for all other applications except as a weapon. And of course, the Galaxy Alliance stepped in and labeled the stuff a first-class chemical weapon. Meaning that no one was supposed to have it.

Hope they'll overlook it this once.

“Son, is that what I think it is?” asked Funaho somewhat nervously. I could just see the twitch in her eye.

“Yep,” I replied as I pulled on the set of goggles the BFG came with and took aim.

“PLASMA WEAPON!” Funaho belted. And just like that, the people who were in the know hit the dirt and pulled the people who were not in the know down with them.

I squeezed the trigger and Sun Spark belched a fat blat of Saint Elmo's Fire at the closest doudo. Its head exploded in a horrific shower of gore and toxic green fire. Even more terrifying, the carcass kept right on burning in sickly green and yellow flames. If Carbon is the slut of organic chemistry, then Fluorine is the serial murder-rapist.

The other three doudo were quick to take note of their comrade's fall and screamed their disapproval as they turned to me and began to charge.

I took aim at the one in the lead and fired again, this time the shot going a bit high and wide, but still managing to burrow through the beast's shoulders and into its body before the magnetic bottle lost its cohesion. It actually vomited gore and fire, its eyes melting into blackened holes in its head, as the blast erupted out its side and the residual chemicals set fire on the side of the doudo next to it.

I grimaced, but I didn't have time to pity the poor creatures for long. The third one was still coming. I only had enough time to drop Sun Spark, its fusion fuel cell depleted after only two shots, and pull Otouto from its sheath once more.

And then I charged the doudo.

The doudo, being used to things my size run from it rather than to it, did not have time to react. And I was about to capitalize on that, beginning with drawing on a bit more of Katherine's power.

Let me say right here that this sort of thing is actually a lot more intuitive than you might think. This is the same sort of power that comprises the Lighthawk Wings, and it is almost a tangible thing and meant to be shifted, moved, and molded. So that's why I had no issue with shunting it all into Otouto... and the Hielzein-S blade drank it greedily and flared a brilliant red as I used it to cut along the side of the doudo, spilling its guts behind me.

Several cracking sounds alerted me to Yume putting Raiden's Toothpick to use. I looked and saw that she used it to put the burning doudo and the one I had cut open out of their misery.

“Power cell's done!” called out Yume. “Hey, handsome! You got another?”

I blinked at Yume in surprise – *Handsome!?* *The hell!?* – then slapped my C-Pod, called one up, and threw it to Yume.

“You know, son, I can admit that this is an extraordinary situation,” said Funaho as I sheathed Otouto and went back for First Cut. “But four doudo in twenty seconds? There's going to be some very unhappy ecologists in the Galaxy Alliance.”

I shrugged. “Had to be done, Mother. I won't have one life here on my conscience today. Besides, it's all that asshole's fault.”

“Very interesting,” rumbled Clay from overhead. “So you don't care about rules...”

I rolled my eyes as I put down two more golems. “Oh, here we go now... AS IF YOU GAVE A SHIT YOURSELF YOU INSUFFERABLE BASTARD CHILD OF A WHORE!”

Clay's eyes flashed ominously. “YOU... LITTLE WRETCH!” he bellowed thunderously. And then the land all around us began to tear itself to pieces. Clay was ripping up the tectonic plates under us.

“Time to run!” I called out to everyone and got moving.

“WHAT DID YOU DO THAT FOR!?” cried out Funaho in shock as she pulled up even with me.

“Bad news,” I explained. “He's pissed off and has taken the kid gloves off. Good news: he's pissed off and *not thinking straight*.”

“I don't think that gets us out of trouble,” Washu called out as she and Yume joined up with us.

“Aren't you two his betters or something?” I asked. “Can't you out-science this fuckhead?”

“Can't,” Washu called back. “He's far too powerful! In fact, I have no idea how he's doing this now or where he got the power from!”

“Yeah, and I'd love to sock that pervert in the nose, Gar-kun,” Yume replied with the sarcasm I was more used to. “Unfortunately I have been denied ultimate power by a certain human. Sound familiar?”

“Sure, blame the backwater hillbilly,” I grumped. I then spied Sasami and Yuki, being carried by Ryoko and Minagi respectively, making their way to our group. “Sasami! I think we're gonna need some Big Help soon.”

“*Tsunami-no-fune* is already on her way!” the princess called back. “It's gonna take a few minutes, though.”

“Great! How're the others?”

“Tenchi and Goghei are ahead of us clearing the way,” Ryoko replied.

“And Ayeka and Mihoshi are keeping us covered from the rear,” Minagi finished.

“What about the Shima Brothers?”

“They're covering us from ambush,” Yume replied tersely. “If you can't see them, then they're doing their jobs properly.”

“That's great,” I replied honestly. “But we're gonna need some sort of stopgap coverage until Tsunami gets here. Mother?”

“I'm sorry, son, but my Husband wishes to see how you get yourself out of this.”

“GYAH!” I snarled in outrage. What did this man expect of me? “AS IF I COULD!”

“He doesn't expect you to overpower your enemy, my son,” Funaho said. “He just wants to see if you can find a way out of this mess.”

“So I'm on the spot then... great.” I then reached out to Katherine. *Is there anything you can do to help?*

I wish could, My tree replied sorrowfully. But I'm not in a proper Central Unit yet... I can create Lighthawk Wings for shields, but they'd only appear inside your garden room! Worst of all we haven't made our Master Key yet!

I sighed at that. *Okay, don't panic yet. We'll figure this out.*

I know what you're thinking at this point. Why don't I use my C-Space as a means of escape? But there's a problem with that. I had no doubt in my mind that Clay could simply seal off my C-Space once I was inside it... and then he'd have exactly what he wanted: me as a bug in a bell jar. In fact, I was pretty sure that was why I was still able to use it – he was counting on me being dumb enough to not realize this fact.

Besides, even if he actually couldn't do that, why take that kind of chance?

Right then, Sasami broke my train of thought. “Yuki-chan! Have you been hearing any strange voices!?”

“... I... didn't want anyone to think anything was wrong with me...” said Yuki nervously.

I blinked as I caught onto what Sasami was thinking right away.

“How long ago, Yuki-chan?” I asked.

“Since yesterday!”

I shot a look at Sasami and it was like she read my mind as she gave me a determined nod.

“Right then. Ryoko! Gonna need a teleport!”

“Who and where to?” asked the former pirate.

“Yuki, Funaho and myself. We're going to go see Bizen!”

Ryoko delivered us precisely onto the platform. I'll have to complement her sometime about it – from what little I know about teleportation in this universe, that is no mean feat and Ryoko pulls it off on a regular basis and with the ease of breathing.

The platform was a sort of temporary unit to contain Bizen until she was brought back to Jurai and placed back into the Royal Nursery. Since Yume had committed Bizen's original partner to space, there was no body to bury. Normal Jurai custom was for the tree to be planted as both a grave marker and a grave keeper. There was a somber symbolism in that. Unless the current partner wills it, the tree will be bonded with that person even in death. And as we know, planting a tree cuts it off from Tsunami's power, thus it slowly loses its sapience until it is simply a mundane, if beautiful tree. But apparently, Bizen's previous partner wanted his tree to find someone new...

...And that she had.

“Alright!” said Funaho briskly. “I know we're in a hurry, but we have to do this right. For that, Ryoko, I'll need you to fetch Ayeka for me – I need her as a second witness under the House of Jurai.”

Ryoko nodded. “Right, back in a second!” And she was gone just like that.

“Good, now Yuki-chan? I'm sorry, but this ceremony is going to hurt a bit. Bizen is going to need some blood to properly key her Master Key to you, so I'll need to borrow one of Garrick's swords to cut your hand. Do you understand?”

Yuki looked a little nervous at the prospect, but nodded regardless. Ryoko then appeared with Ayeka, who then ran to Yuki and scooped her up into a crushing hug.

“I am so sorry it has to be like this, Yuki-chan,” Ayeka said as she cried softly. “The bonding ceremony is supposed to be a beautiful thing. I never wanted what happened to me to happen to anyone else.”

“Sister, Clay's coming,” I said, not unkindly, but urgently. “We need shields!”

Ayeka set Yuki back down, kissing the top of her head before she turned and nodded to me. She then turned to Funaho.

“I'll do this where I can watch the bonding. Please hurry, mother – I don't know how long I can hold him off.”

Funaho nodded as Ayeka cast her arms out wide, summoning a myriad of the little logs that were the physical manifestation of the power shared between her and her tree, Ryuu-Oh-no-Ki. And the shield then snapped into place.

“Son, I'll need you to use one of your swords and carefully cut her hand. She'll be healed afterward, but don't make it too deep.”

I nodded as I drew First Cut. “Got it.”

“Now comes your part, Yuki. Listen to Bizen – she will tell you exactly what you must say.”

Yuki nodded and looked to Bizen, a far away look suddenly coming across her eyes.

“I, Yuki Mihara, just as the First Emperor did on the First Day, hear your voice, Bizen of the Second Generation of Tsunami-no-Ki, progenitor of all trees of Jurai. I swear to care for you in all my days, until I am no longer able to. In return, I accept your gifts of power and long life. And now, I shall seal this pact with my own life force. Accept this blood sacrifice, Bizen, and forever be at my side.”

Funaho nodded to me and I knelt down by Yuki, taking her left hand gently and pressing one of First Cut's cutting edges carefully into her palm. Yuki winced and squelched a whimper. She didn't even look at it, but instead went straight to Bizen's mighty trunk and pressed her wounded hand against the bark.

The blood sank into the bark and something incredible happened. Thin tendrils grew out of the trunk, wrapped themselves around her wrist and formed themselves into a beautiful and intricately

woven bracelet, bound close around her wrist so it would not come off. A jewel of amber formed within the bracelet, and the tendrils fell away.

Then, on what seemed to be a final instruction from Bizen, Yuki went to the pool that surrounded us and dipped her hands into the water, cupping them and drinking deeply. As soon as she was finished, she then winced in pain again, her face grimacing in agony.

“It's fine,” Funaho said as I went to Yuki's side. “It is the Water of Life. Normally, it is a powerful healing agent that can even bring a person back from near-death... but in the Bonding Ceremony, it is what perfects the body so it may last for thousands of years.”

I nodded as I held Yuki's trembling little form close to me. Right then, her body wasn't really changing much. Everything was staying in the same place it had always been... the real changes, though, were more profound and much deeper. Every cell in her body was having its DNA rewritten, re-sequenced, and cleared of any and all imperfections. She would never age beyond her twentieth year of life. She would never suffer from any form of cancer or congenital illness. The stemcells that she had remaining would function perfectly for far longer than they had any right to – uncorrupted by time and wear.

Clay wailed against Ayeka's shields, but by the Goddess she held him at bay and with such a vicious look of determination and righteous indignation. Even so, her shield was starting to visibly crack.

“Come on, tiny love,” I whispered to Yuki with gentle urgency. “Snap out of it. We need your help.”

Suddenly, Yuki stopped trembling in my arms and stood up. She was a bit wobbly and unsteady, but she wore her usual look of determination.

Yuki Mihara was back in action and I knew that she would not be stopped by ordinary force.

“No more running,” she whispered and walked to Ayeka's side. “No more hiding,” she stated, her voice beginning to pick up. “I may be small, but I will no longer be weak! I refuse! I will no longer be the one that needs to be protected! Instead, I will be the protector!”

Yuki then held out her left arm, hand balled in a defiant fist and the gem on her Master Key sparkling.

“BIZEN!” she cried out ferocious triumph. “REQUEST PERMISSION FROM KIRITO FOR OFFENSIVE USE OF LIGHTHAWK WINGS! WE SHALL MAKE THIS MAN PAY FOR HOW HE HURT OUR BELOVED!”

Regardless of whether she got that permission or not, a trio of massive Lighthawk Wings appeared, centered where Yuki had her fist pointed, and enclosing Ayeka's shield. A split second later, the wings spread out into full coverage and Ayeka dropped her own shield and sagged to the deck, even as Clay raged impotently against Bizen's Lighthawk Shield.

“Magnificent, Yuki!” sighed Ayeka as the strain left her body. “Absolutely magnificent... though maybe I should start thinking of you as my little sister now – stepmother is sure to adopt you as well.”

“I suppose I should,” Funaho said with a self-deprecating smile. “At least, so long as you don't mind, Yuki-chan?”

Yuki didn't take her eyes off Clay for a moment, but smiled regardless.

“No, not really... I was already preparing myself to think of you as my mother-in-law... I'm glad though... My own parents can be so distant, but you're so warm and gentle. Sometimes I just want a hug.” Yuki then scowled up at Clay. And then she screamed with all her repressed rage and fury – the sheer vitriol carried by the sound of her voice alone was cringe inducing, and all the more shocking for her tiny and innocent appearance. “YOU HEAR THAT!? YOU WANT TO TAKE THAT AWAY FROM ME!? JUST TRY IT AND I'LL DO TEN-THOUSAND-TIMES WORSE TO YOU!”

Oh wow. Yuki never talked about her home life. Now I knew why. It was the classical absentee parent syndrome – a regular occurrence in Japan. For sure, plenty of Japanese women were stay-at-home-housewives... but many others worked part-time jobs in restaurants or as office ladies once their children could take care of themselves. And in Japan, that could be as young as eight years of age.

For at least six years or more, poor little Yuki Mihara had been living a lonely life. For her, running into me must have been a godsend, no matter the circumstances.

I went to Yuki and Ayeka, settled between them both, and wrapped an arm around each other them, pulling them both close... my tiny little fiance and my beloved sister.

“Death will be too good for you, you little wench!” snarled Clay. “Your shield won't last forever!”

“It doesn't need to last forever,” I said with an evil smile. “Just until help gets here. Isn't that right, Tsunami-sama?” Clay's expression faltered and he looked around comically.

But there was no sign of Tsunami.

I quickly started to become worried. I could have sworn that there was something in the air that reminded me of Tsunami. It was so distinct – a sense of power in the air that made me feel hopeful whenever I encountered it.

“Oh... I'm not my sister, but I am impressed that you noticed me arriving, child.”

And then her image appeared, standing high above everything as it was her utter and divine right to do so. Coiffed in elaborate clothing of burgundy and black and a gravity defying cape of white, the heavens seemingly hidden within her skirt, the golden head dress perched on her brow, overlaying her brown hair... But most of all, that sharp, regal face, ornamented with grass-blade designs, and those imperious black-within-indigo eyes.

I was expecting Tsunami.

Tokimi had arrived instead.

Clay actually blanched.

“So, this is what you have been up to? Stealing this child from his home? Warping his mind to rewrite his name? Thinking this would not go on unnoticed!?”

“Hah! Even you must admit that he is everything you have been building towards.”

“He may be evidence that such beings exist, but he is still a child! A neglected one, perhaps, but still a child.”

“As if you ever let that stop you!”

“He was beyond our reach and he should have remained so! Your overreaching has left me no choice – I shall deal with you myself as I should have before!”

And then just like that... Clay was gone.

“What did you do with him?” I asked.

Tokimi frowned. *“Nothing. It was not him. He was never here. This... was a feint.”*

I blinked as the implications of that began to cycle through my head.

“Mother?”

“Yes, my son?”

“You know how I'm not usually phased by much? I am now officially *worried*.”

“You're not alone in that regard, Garrick.”

Funaho and I were suddenly interrupted. “So, you are the one that has Tsunami's attention.”

There in front of us was Tokimi at a human stature. This was not to say, though, that she still wasn't imposing.

“I am,” I said as I stood up, and bowed to the youngest of the Choushin. “Garrick Grimm, Mada-”

Tokimi silenced me with a gesture. “That is all, young one. My curiosity, for now, is satisfied.” She then turned to leave, but paused, looking over her shoulder. “Become strong, child. There are many beings out there that would like to make a meal out of you.” And with that, Tokimi vanished.

“Who... Who was that?” Ayeka asked somewhat nervously.

“Tsunami's angry little sister,” I replied. “the Third of the Three Choushin.”

Ayeka gave me an astounded look. “And she just...”

I shrugged. “Clay was her servant. It only stands to reason that she'd feel somewhat responsible I guess.”

I felt a hand on my shoulder. “We need to get you to Jurai,” Funaho said quietly.

I nodded and looked to Yuki, expecting to answer about a thousand questions.

Instead, I found her to be slumped against my side, out like a light. So, I picked her up, feeling a deep and profound love for the little girl who had at last returned the favor I had done for her. That felt like it had been years ago.

I walked over to Bizen, placing a hand over the trunk.

“You don't mind if I take her with me, do you, Bizen?”

There was a short moment of silence as the tree contemplated my request, and then the beams of rainbow light shined down from her leaves and I heard the tree's sweet, contralto voice in my head.

“When Tsunami called for any volunteers... I did so without hesitation. I liked her the first moment I saw her. So very strong of heart. So willing to fight for what she loves. But despite that strength... Katherine tells me you have realized that she has been alone until she met you. Yes, she was indeed a little girl that was infatuated with a strong male figure... but then she discovered that he was just like her – alone despite not really being alone, warm despite the cold world you bore through... she couldn't help herself. You were everything she ever wanted.

“She fell hopelessly in love with you.

“If you had refused her flat-out... it probably would have killed this poor child. Instead, you have wisely offered her familial companionship and warmth until she is old enough to make a proper choice. When she made a horrible mistake, you did not really punish her – instead you brought home the consequences of her choice to her in realistic terms, and she has learned more in this month than she has most of her life.

“Because you have been so good to her, she now loves you more than herself. I know, this can be a very bad thing. But, in time, I will help her with bringing her emotions to heel. For now, though... Take little Yuki-chan with you – she needs you more than we need each other. Besides... she and I are only a thought apart.”

I looked up to the canopy and smiled as I pulled my hand back.

“Thank you, Bizen.” I then turned and saw that everyone else had arrived.

Tenchi and Ryoko were helping Ayeka up, pulling her into a hug. Funaho, Mihoshi, Washu, and Goghei stood aside, watching the tableau with smiles. Sasami, though, her hair still not put back up into pigtails, came right up to me and wrapped her arms around my waist as she buried her head in my side. Smiling down at her, I rubbed her back.

“I'm so happy for you two,” said the blue-haired princess softly.

“You and me both, little sister.” I then turned to the others. “Let's all get the hell out of here.”

Ayeka and Sasami said their goodbyes to Goghei and Asahi, extracting a promise to be notified when the wedding date was set. I myself went and made sure to collect any toys I had left behind – in particular, Sun Spark. Funaho comforted me in that this being a Juraian territory that the Galaxy Alliance will remain ignorant of Sun Spark's unusual properties... so long as I only ever use it in similarly dire circumstances.

As for the carcasses, Washu handled that. She was very curious to see what sort of lingering compounds had been left behind from Sun Spark's burning chemical death.

Before we left, though, Hishima and Goghei had it out, and just as he had in the original time-line for the manga, Hishima adapted to Goghei's ultimate attack. I was there for it, but my heart wasn't really in it... come to think of it, I don't think anyone really was. Even Goghei himself seemed resigned to the inevitable and was merely going through the motions. Not that Goghei didn't give it everything he had. Hishima was still a bit put out, though.

We were in no real rush as we left on *Hinase*. It was Funaho's suggestion – we needed a couple of days to get our heads back together and she needed a day or two to finalize the arrangements for our being there as well as the ceremony. There was also the matter of having Bizen and Katherine placed into proper Juraian Central Units and then taking them to Ryuten to have the exterior hulls fitted. I suggested that we summon up Ryu-Oh from Washu's Lab and have that Central Unit fitted out as well. Funaho and Ayeka both thought it was a splendid idea.

Yume surprised us by joining us on *Hinase*, and again by ordering Hishima and Takashima to remain on their own ship – if she had need of them, then she'd call on them.

For my part, I simply loafed around. Heck, we all did to one extent or another. Sure, we all helped Sasami make dinner, but it was a low-key affair – home-style chicken and vegetable curry, better than CoCo Ichibanya. Dear sweet Goddess help me, but I devoured two heaping plates. Yuki, bless her little heart, ate nearly as much. No one complained, though. We made sure to make more than enough, because the only thing better than curry is curry that's been left to sit a day or two in the refrigerator. In fact, it was the point entirely so that Sasami wouldn't really have to cook much before reaching Jurai.

We were all gonna smell like cumin by the time we got to Jurai and nobody gave a shit.

Our torpor extended through the rest of the evening – the only real exception being me making sure that Yuki stayed caught up on her home work.

“Okay,” said Yuki boredly as she shut a work book. “How much more?”

“That's the last of it, tiny love.”

Yuki then looked up at me with a serious gleam in her eyes. “Family bath time.”

I smiled and nodded my head. “Family bath time.”

It was something that I had admittedly, not only gotten used to, but had come to look forward to. Of course, we always kept ourselves covered up with towels in the bath, but that wasn't the point.

The point was that this was family time. A pure and unabashed lowering of all pretenses and barriers, just to relax and be ourselves. I know I've mentioned it all before – I just feel it bears repeating.

We all scrubbed each others backs, shampooed, washed down, rinsed off, and just like that we were easing ourselves into the hot, steaming water.

“Ahhhh, I think I could just fall asleep here,” said Minagi as she leaned up against me.

“Me too,” agreed Yuki as she did the same on my other side. “So... what are we gonna do after all this is over and we get back home? I mean...” Yuki trailed for there as she tried to find a way to say what she wanted to say. “... I... I don't want to go back home. It isn't home. It hasn't been for a long time. I know my mother and father care about my well being... but they seem to care about work even more. They already make enough money. They have a trust fund for my college education set aside – I've been told it's enough to fund me for six years at Tokyo University if I decided to go. The only person that really talks to me anymore is Grandfather.”

I puffed my cheeks out in a sigh. “I dunno, Yuki, that's kind of a big deal... and legally speaking, it's well above my paygrade. I think we'll have to talk to Noboyuki and maybe even get his lawyer involved.”

Yuki looked up to me with hopeful eyes. “But if it's okay, you'll let me live with you, right?”

I smiled down at the precocious girl. “Of course I will. In fact, when we get back home I'll change my C-Space so we'll all have our own rooms inside.”

Yuki seemed a bit apprehensive at that. “Our own... rooms?”

“Yes,” I nodded. “Even if you decide not to sleep in your own bed, I think it's best that we each have our own private spaces.”

“So... You're not going to force me to stay away?”

“I might get Sasami-chan to distract you for a night now and then, but I won't force you away. You are my tiny love.” I then gave Yuki a kiss on her head. Yuki, in turn, made a muffled squealing sound as she made an attempt to crush my ribs.

“So, this is where you disappeared to,” came the voice of Yume as she walked into the bath. She then smirked over at me. “Huh. Washu told me that you were a hit with the available girls. I didn't think any other species could manage to set their differences aside so readily to share a male.”

I raised an eyebrow. “Your people are polyamorous?”

Yume scoffed disdainfully as she went and began to scrub down, not caring about me seeing her nude as she cast her towel aside.

“No. Monogamous matriarchal society. Though there are a few times when a group of sisters will band together and single out a male they all like. Rare, but it does happen. Survival of the fittest is still a thing on my world and when there's that one guy that has a knack for getting out of bad situations all the time, he tends to attract attention in that way. Really, such males on my world aren't unlike you, handsome.”

“So you think of me as a survivalist?” I asked.

“I think of you as someone who wins,” replied Yume. “And on my world, winners aren't simply the strongest, though it helps when the apex predators can give those doudo we faced a fair run for their money. No, what really helps a person win on my world is being smart enough to keep your head on your shoulders and in the game. On my world, males tend to be weaker. Matriarchal, you know. Females may make the babies, but males stay home, take care of the young, teach them, and work the fields. Us females, though, we're the hunters and the traders.” As Yume came back over, clean but still without a towel, she bore a smile that showed off her sharp canines.

“I'm sure you've noticed how sharp my teeth are.”

“I have,” I said slowly, starting to feel light headed.

Yume chuckled and slipped into the water and made her way over. “So, what about you two ladies?” asked Yume coyly. “You must certainly understand that your man is expected to take on a few more women as wives – him being adopted into the Family of Jurai and all. How do you feel about it?”

Suddenly everything about Yume seemed that much more fascinating. The color of her hair and eyes, the shape of her face and the lilt in her hips as she moved through the water...

“I'm okay,” said Yuki. “If Garrick finds another woman to marry, then I want to be a good friend to her. I know it shouldn't be a problem because Garrick won't marry someone that isn't nice to Minagi and me.”

Minagi herself nodded. “Exactly. I've already accepted that I won't hold the position of First Wife. All that really matters to me is that Garrick loves me and that he'll love the children we make together. Though it will be helpful that any other wives will be good to me and my children.”

Yume grinned at that. “Not unlike home. We all have to work together for the sake of our pack.”

Something was wrong, but I couldn't put my finger on it. I just couldn't take my eyes off of Yume – whatever was wrong it had to do with her somehow...

“You know,” said Yume, changing the subject, “I've wondered about having children. It's hard not to – my kind are hard-wired for that sort of thing. Our lives are usually cut short by the appetite of something else, so we maintain a high birthrate. Oh, I can manipulate my body to avoid the mating-urge, just as I can make myself ageless. And I did, for a time... until I met Washu. Now there's someone with a wicked mind – a person I could respect for her intelligence and cunning. It was a shame I could find few males as smart as her... and those that were either had no interest, despite my best efforts, or were complete perverts.

“Now, I could have asked her to spare me an ova, and I did... but she refused for whatever reason. So, I came up with that whole scam in the first place to get her to be my slave... because once she was my slave Washu would not be able to say no anymore. I would be able to have as many children as I pleased by fusing our ova together.”

Yume then gave me a sharp look: an expression of challenge, and I felt myself begin to smolder.

“But then, you showed up and spoiled the whole thing. But that was alright... because you then challenged me directly. You and me, me and you, pitting ourselves against each other. Just like the old days at home where a male and female would single each other out. And more often than not the female will win, and then she decides whether she wants him or not... but if the male wins...”

Yume chuckled indulgently. “Then he'll be bitten for sure.. and he'll belong to her.”

Bitten? The bite? THAT BITE!

“What did you do to me,” I said as I stood up and slowly approached Yume, watching for a potential attack.

Yume gave me a feral grin as we began to circle each other. “I did what any other female in her right mind would do – I gave you my bite, marking you as mine.”

“WHAT!?” I heard Yuki snap as she floundered in the bath water.

She chuckled again and shot a brief look at Yuki. “Don't worry, dear... I won't monopolize him... I just want a bit of the action... he's such a prime male that it's worth it.”

“What does that bite do, Yume?” I asked in a low tone, almost snarling.

Yume grinned back, her teeth glinting in the light. “It's a compound of several things the females of my kind naturally produce. You see, before we take our mating partners, males are just as undeveloped as I look now. But the compound has in it triggering hormones that start the male's own physical maturation... as well as a retrovirus that will key him to respond to the pheromones of the female that bit him! Afterward, she'll only have to wait for him to hunt her down... and fertilize her for the first time, triggering her own maturation.”

I was practically seeing red as I lunged at Yume, grabbing her and pinning her to the side of the bath.

“You... tampered... with me!?”

Yume didn't fight back. Instead, she gave me that grin once more. “Oh my, but you are bold. You're really going to do it? Right here? In front of your other women?”

That snapped me out of it as I recoiled in horror. Because of her bite's influence I had been picking up on her pheromones, which were currently hanging a sign over my vision of Yume and proclaiming “SEX” in screaming neon-light letters. And Goddess help me, she wanted it, too. She wanted it hard, brutal, and...

“I have to go,” I said suddenly as I began to leave. “I'm sorry... gotta talk to Washu.” Minagi and Yuki didn't even try to stop me.

“Go ahead,” Yume called out tauntingly. “Talk to Washu. She'll straighten you out alright... but I'll be waiting for you regardless, handsome.”

“I was worried about this,” Washu sighed after I explained what had happened in the bath. “I blame myself, really. There were a lot of signs, but the clearest one of them all was the fact she bit you. Honestly, I should have done something then.”

“You can fix this, right?” I said. “I mean I can't be going around wanting to screw her like an animal every time she shows up.”

“I could fix it,” Washu admitted. “But really, at this point it's for the best if you learn how to control it.”

I blinked. “I can?”

Washu nodded. “You're right about wanting to 'screw her like an animal'. Because it's coming from the animalistic part of your brain – the part that handles all your base desires and needs, including the desire to have sex and reproduce. Keep that in mind and you should have no problem in dealing with her.”

I was a bit astounded that Washu was brushing this aside like that, but I wasn't going to give up so readily.

“Okay, yeah, animal side of my brain,” I said a bit sarcastically. “The primitive part that's separate from the cerebrum. Got it. Still doesn't help me if I'm in the middle of something and she comes on by and I start thinking about pinning her to a wall and ripping her clothes off.”

Washu snorted. “Kinky, but it sounds nice in an immediate kind of way. Really, Garrick, it is for the better. Besides, didn't you extoll over her qualities at one point in time?”

“Aren't you being something of an enabler here?”

Washu gave me a sharp, calculating look. “Okay,” she said levelly. “I will admit, I am kinda rooting for Yume here. But at the same time, Garrick, just like you push Tenchi to be a leader, I'd like to push you to fend for yourself without resorting to my help.”

I fumed for a moment and Washu just kept staring me down. But then I thought about it for a moment. Washu had been helping me with a lot of things lately. Granted, it was mostly her own interest to see what sort of plausible insanity I could cook up if she just turned me loose on her stockpiles of advanced technology. But even so, a lot of that was me coming up with inventive ways of working around the power-gap between me and everyone else here, such as Sun Spark and Raiden's Toothpick. Not to mention all the other times she's gone out of her way to not only save my life, but also make sure that I won't always need intensive medical care if I get 'roughed up' a bit.

“Alright,” I said slowly, still a little peeved even though I had recognized that I had developed a nasty sense of entitlement lately. “So I have to deal with it then. How is this supposed to work between her and I? I'm not just gonna be some sperm donor.”

“No, that's not how she was raised,” said Washu. “Believe it or not, while Yume may view her servants as mere tools, the man she chooses as a mate is not someone she would trifle with – he's not just going to be a sperm donor. Think about it, Garrick – intelligence factors into her criteria, but that's nothing without someone willing to pass on their knowledge. And besides, she already knows you'd be a good father figure.”

“Yeah, I get it...” I sighed as I quit pacing and plunked myself down into a chair. “Do you think Yume was being serious when she said that she wouldn't cause any trouble for the other girls?”

“She's a schemer, not a liar,” Washu replied perfunctorily. “If she says that she honestly wants to work with your other paramours, then she will. Don't forget that she comes from a survival-driven people that band together in packs. Strife in the pack is not a healthy thing. If anything, she might be good for the makeup of your household – she'll make sure that everyone toes the line.”

I blinked at that. “So you're saying she'll be my enforcer? Weird.”

Washu shrugged. “Not her style, really. She just won't tolerate having to deal with anyone's crap. Anyhow, I know I said I shouldn't swoop in to rescue you, but that doesn't mean I can't lend a hand. That said...” Washu reached into her pocket and pulled out a pair of innocuous looking pills. “Here, swallow these.” she said as she handed them to me.

“What are they?” I asked as I looked them over in my palm.

“They'll suppress her pheromones' reaction with the receptors in your olfactory nerves. But not completely. You'll still feel a moderate physical attraction to her – just not an immediate desire to have sex with her. And it's only good for forty-eight hours. Use that time to keep her around and decide if you want her to be part of your family or not.”

“Alright then,” I grumbled as I popped the pills and swallowed. They had a candy-like gel coat that made them easy to swallow. A spoon full of sugar really does help the medicine go down.

“Good on you,” cheered Washu, but then her expression sobered. “Honestly, Garrick, I do hope that you two hit it off despite this bad impression. Yume's actually a good friend of mine – we had a lot of fun back in our Academy days even though we never really collaborated much. It'll be nice if we can call each other family someday.”

“Yeah, well if we don't click, then we don't click. Otherwise, I'll just take your word on good faith and give the pint-sized terror the benefit of a doubt.”

When I arrived back to Minagi's bedroom suite, it was to an incredibly odd tableau.

Yume, bound from her neck to ankles in seemingly endless coils of rope like a damsel-in-distress from a cheesy Saturday morning cartoon. She wore an expression of long-suffering patience.

Yuki and Minagi were on either side of her, both wearing eminently satisfied smiles.

“Okaaayyyyy,” I drawled out. “I was expecting a lot, but this was not exactly one of them.”

“How so?” asked Minagi coyly.

“Everything in here is still intact.”

Yuki laughed and Minagi shook her head, but was smiling regardless.

“After you left it was like Yume relaxed some,” said Yuki. “Of course, Minagi and I were still kinda angry with her... we didn't even realize she wasn't fighting back until we were half-way done tying her up. She didn't even say anything to stop us. It was kinda weird.”

“Did you think I was lying before?” grumbled Yume, “I want to show good faith on my part. I won't be the one to cause trouble... well, at least no more than these two are willing to handle.”

I crossed my arms and gave Yume my patented 'pull the other one' look.

“Cute,” I said with sarcasm I only half-felt. Really, Yume was an adorable little spitfire. The trouble was that there were times that she was just so full of piss and vinegar... But that aside, Minagi and Yuki were still steamed with Yume, and I wanted answers myself. “Yume, what the hell happened earlier? I mean, besides the obvious. Why did you come on to me in such a way that was gonna antagonize me and my ladies?”

Yume looked down in shame. “I... stopped taking my inhibitors.”

“Inhibitors?” I asked. “What do they inhibit?”

“Hormones, mostly,” Yume said. “You remember what I said about how this all works? Part of the reason for that is that it saves our ova cells for when they'll be most useful. You see... my kind's reproductive system is among the most efficient in the galaxy. We only ever ovulate *after* intercourse, so there is a far greater chance that every one of our ova will be put to use – it is a rare thing for a female of my kind to reach menopause.

“To make sure that we are doing our part, we have a hormone that builds up in our system over time that drives us to seek out our mate. It's how we know we're ready – when the desire to find an

acceptable male becomes overwhelming. The act of mating will purge the hormone from our systems, but it will slowly build up once more, ensuring that we keep having babies to maintain our population.

“I am over five-thousand years old and as you know I have yet to take a mate. When I stopped taking my inhibitors this morning, I didn't think it would hit me so hard. I only really realized what had happened after you left, so I took a half-dose of my inhibitors right away... and then Minagi and Yuki cornered me. The rest you know about now.”

Well, that was food for thought.

“So,” I said thoughtfully, “you just had some kind of insatiable mating urge overwhelm you, but you're feeling better now.” I gave Yume an appraising look. “Okay. I think I can accept that... but there's something that's still bothering me. I'm still wondering exactly why you suddenly chose me. There has got to be more to this than me just coming in and derailing things. I get the idea that I may represent some prime candidate in the primeval sense, but what more is there? Why me?”

Yume sighed. “Lady Funaho kept records of you. She noticed that I was fixated on you, so she let me see some of them... Her recorded observations about you, the letters that Princess Sasami wrote, and even some video recordings. You are not just smart. You're alpha-male material. Not simply because you like to establish yourself as a leader, but also because you will work with others to make them better – like how you keep pushing your younger brother to be a leader himself and how you whipped Yuki into shape.

“The strongest packs aren't the ones with males and females that seek to utterly dominate their underlings. In those packs, where the leaders destroy any that may pose a threat to their position and status, they only destroy that which would make their pack strong. Such packs are short-lived and are, in turn, destroyed by stronger packs that foster leadership in the lower ranks. If this means a young pup will take the place of an honored leader, then it is not only deemed acceptable, but the new leader will be groomed by the elder to take their place.

“So you see, my interest in you is not simply some perception of status. Among my people, a good leader amongst the males is also a good father – someone that teaches the pups, raises and protects them with care. The Pack is Family, and Family is everything. Do you think I would want anything less for my children?”

I gave Yume a hard look. “No, you wouldn't. But what of the male in question? How he feels about you and your actions towards him?”

“Do you not want something similar?” asked Yume in return, her look just as hard as mine. “Look around you! You already have the beginnings of an excellent pack! You have two highly valuable females. Minagi is a proven warrior. Yuki, on the other hand, is too young to mate. However, she is turning into an excellent female in her own right! Do you think I didn't see how she willingly underwent her transformation? She did it not only for herself, but for you! If this is the pack that you are building, then I want in.” Yume then bowed her head, seemingly in shame. “And I am willing to humble myself if that is what it takes... I only want the absolute best for my children.”

Children. Is that all she really wanted? But the problem there is that from her perspective, a mate is part-and-parcel with children. I could honestly appreciate and even honor that, but I still had concerns.

Katherine, any chance that you can see what her pheromones are doing to me?

Unh! Replied my tree cheerfully. They're definitely trying to do a number on you.

Washu-chan's remedy is working, though – nowhere near as many are activating the receptors in your olfactory. I think those mating hormones of hers are tied to her pheromone production. If you do make pictures of spring with her, then it will taper off – she won't produce as many pheromones and you'll be a little more desensitized.

Who's side are you on!? I thought back at my tree in bewilderment as she giggled at my expense. *As attractive as that sounds to my baser self, not right now. I want to really get to know Yume before I decide whether or not to make her mine... Ugh, no, I mean to accept her...*

Really, it kinda hurt my ego to have that thought. There really is a part of my mind that wants me to dominate and rule over any and all women that come my way. Fortunately, it's tempered by my compassion for their feelings, so at its worst this part of my mind is reduced to wanting them to submit of their own free will instead of raping everything in sight.

Katherine, on the other hand, simply giggled again.

It's okay, Gar-kun. I know it's kinda tough when your mind is all fuzzy from Yume-chan's smell. You just wanna gobble them all up for yourself, don't you?

I rolled my eyes and thought back, *You know you aren't helping much, right?*

Katherine giggled once more. *In the end, I'm really just another one of your girls. We just relate on a different level... but on that level, I'm more than happy to have Gar-kun gobble me up, too! Om-nom-nom-nom!*

I had to keep myself from laughing at that last bit.

So, my women wanted me to 'gobble them up' as Katherine put it. That may be what the natural man does, but it's not what I am supposed to do. Granted, I did this with Minagi – she practically threw herself at me and I obliged her, giving each other comfort in our sharing of our bodies and hearts.

But now, things between Minagi and I were deeper. She was ready to start a family, and that meant I had to be a lot more selective in who I shared my body with, let alone become a part of the family. Add Yuki into the mix as well...

...Well, if you look deeply enough into historical and religious texts where good and righteous men had more than one wife, you would find that he simply didn't make any decisions on the spur of the moment. He first had to hear what all of his wives' thoughts on a given matter, and then weigh their opinions with great care before deciding on a path.

In all reality, this is only common sense no matter how you slice it. You can't run roughshod over anyone in your family. Everyone's feelings need to be taken into consideration. Even if you can't please everyone at once, what is important is that you took the time to hear them out and gave it an honest try. (In my opinion, this would be especially true of the children – they're the ones who are impacted the most by a patriarch's decisions!)

"Minagi?" I asked.

"I don't like what she did," Minagi said thoughtfully, mulling the situation over in her head. "She's subverted your feelings. That is not right, even if it is how her people do things." She then gave Yume a harsh look. "You should have tried to win his heart before doing that to him."

Yume flinched at Minagi's rebuttal, but said nothing. Her only response was to lower her head even further.

I sighed and then looked to Yuki. "What do you think, tiny love?"

Yuki, for her part, hummed thoughtfully, and suddenly reached out, lifting Yume's face to her own, and stared deeply into Yume's eyes. Yume started at the sudden intrusion of personal space, but relaxed somewhat when she saw that no attack was forthcoming.

"You don't like being alone, do you?" asked Yuki suddenly, surprising all of us at once.

"How can *you* tell?" Yume replied sullenly.

"Because your eyes are just like how mine used to be. I was alone, too... until Garrick saved my life. Minagi used to be lonely, too. Even Garrick... I think his loneliness was the worst."

I went over and gently nudged Yuki aside, then hunkered down and looked into Yume's eyes myself. Yuki was right – there was a lot of hurt hidden in those angry looking eyes, and only the least of it was fresh from the last few days.

Was that what this all boiled down to? It would make sense, especially if Yume really did come from a pack-based society. Being alone all that time, no one to support her, with only herself fending for herself... it was a miracle she was as sane as she was.

I felt a wave of pity for the pint-sized genius, so I looked to Minagi once more.

“Well, what do you think?”

Minagi sighed and I could tell that she was honestly struggling with this. Of course she hated what Yume did to me, but having dealt with the pain of solitude herself she could also somewhat understand why Yume would suddenly become so desperate.

Minagi finally gave Yume a sharp look. “Alright... You came from a place where women are in charge? It's different now. He's the one in charge. Not you. Not me. Not Yuki-chan. And when he finds a woman of the Jurai family to marry, not even she is gonna be in charge. Garrick is very kind and very lenient... and I can tell he wants to give you a chance. I don't know for sure if this is your bite messing with his head, but if you hurt him at all... I'll destroy you.”

I placed a gentle hand on Minagi's shoulder and I felt the tension slowly begin to bleed out of her.

“I submit,” Yume said in a small, almost broken voice. And really, I could tell that Yume was broken up inside. She wanted this – she wanted it so desperately that she was willing to swallow every bit of her broken pride, choking down every jagged shard of it, just so she can have what was most important to her: a family and the chance to bring about the next generation.

Feeling that it was the right thing to do, I knelt down in front of Yume, gently put my face to hers, giving her a soft nuzzle, and inhaled deeply. Her soft musk filled my nose and I immediately felt a deep-seated desire to hold her close. Yume pressed herself against me as I inhaled. She almost seemed to purr.

So, this is what it feels like to have your animal-brain mess with you, I thought to myself. *It's not unpleasant... but I can see how it can get out of control.* I sighed as I pulled away from Yume. Yume herself was blushing as she looked downwards shyly.

“Well,” I said at something of a loss for what else to say. “Since you girls have given your probationary approval, then we should get started.” And with that, I carefully swept Yume off her feet in a bridal carry and took her over to the bed. There, I sat her down and began to work at the knot in her back.

Soon enough, the coils all fell away. Yume was left bare of anything except panties and a chest wrap.

“There, that looks better,” I said.

Yuki giggled while Yume scowled. “What's so funny?” she asked.

Rather than say it, Yuki lifted her pajama-top, revealing her own chest wrap.

“We never really thought about it because we were too quick getting dressed again.”

“Well, I don't know about you guys,” Minagi interrupted with a smirk, “ but I think we should keep the ropes and tie her to the bed.”

Yume said nothing. She only blushed. She wasn't the only one.

“Well, let's get under the covers,” I said. Yume was about to ask, so I preempted her. “With all of us under the covers it gets awful warm, so we adjust the environmental controls to mimic conditions I'm more familiar with: the desert at night. That means that it gets cold and dry in here at night, so it's best if we all cuddle together.”

And just like that a cool breeze passed through the room, making Yume shudder.

I got in first, followed by Yume. Yuki, surprisingly, snuggled up to Yume.

“What are you doing?” asked Yume suspiciously.

“You don't have any night clothes with you,” said Yuki, playing it straight. “You'll need someone on your other side to help keep you warm. Besides, you're Sasami-chan's size. When we spend nights together, we like to snuggle like this because we're like sisters. Also, if you want Gar-kun so badly, then you have to get me, too. We're a set, after all.”

“I appreciate the thought,” grumbled Yume, “but maybe I should just borrow a set of sleeping clothes.”

“Nope,” stated Yuki, and before Yume could say any more on the matter, she tangled Yume's legs with her own. Yume gave Yuki a startled look, only for Yuki to give her a peck on the lips. With Yume utterly stunned, Yuki smiled coyly at the pint-sized supergenius. “I like how you feel... it's a little like Gar-kun... so solid, but so soft and warm.”

Yume turned her head to give me a shocked look and I had to suppress a laugh.

“Yuki, tiny love? Do you like Yume?”

Yuki talked through a yawn. “Unh... she may not be like Minagi-nee yet... I guess that is part of why I like her.”

“So you are attracted to girls as well?”

Yuki was quiet for a moment. “You won't be angry?”

“Of course not, tiny love. I just want you to be happy and honest with yourself and us.”

“Honestly?”

“Honestly.”

“Well... I used to like only other girls. It always felt safer because my father told me how nasty and mean boys could be. But I learned that there is one man I really like.” Yuki lifted her head up and gave me a sleepy looking, beatific smile. “I love my Gar-kun... and I hope that Gar-kun and my sister-wives will love me just as much.” And with that, Yuki flopped back down into her spot and snuggled a little closer to Yume, who continued to give me a surprised look.

I simply shrugged. “I had wondered about it myself, but I never knew for sure until now. So, now that we're all comfortable... Yume... I want to know all about you. Tell me about where you came from and how you got here.”

From there, we spent a good deal of the night talking quietly together.

Yume had come from a very hard world – it was covered with temperate conifer rainforests and had huge predators like massive feathered theropods. There were smaller varieties, too. Some deadlier and more intelligent than others. Some of the smallest ones her people had been able to domesticate, much like how wild horses and wolves had been.

Prey animals consisted of massive, wooly sauropods – dangerous to hunt, not only due to their size and lethality, but also because the predators were opportunists and had no issue with poaching another kill.

Yume's people were descended from a race of raccoon-like mammals. Omnivorous, dextrous, intelligent, and adaptive, they thrived in the kingdom of giants and began to make tools, agriculture, and a pack-based matriarchal society.

At some point, pirates had arrived on her world and enslaved a good number of her people, forcibly uplifting them so they could better make food and mine for raw materials. Eventually, the Galaxy Alliance caught on to what was happening and annihilated the pirates – no quarter was given to the slavers. But for Yume's people, there was no real going back. While they had their freedom, they also knew very well about the existence of other worlds with other people and the technology they possessed.

However, while her people welcomed their freedom, they stoutly refused space-faring technology. They only took what they felt was needed for their survival, such as advanced medical technologies, food preservation technology, and weaponry to defend themselves and hunt with.

It was at this time that Yume had been born. Yume herself had been an up-and-comer during this golden age of her people. Intelligent and cunning before her time, she was going to be the next matriarch of her pack... until when she was the equivalent twenty Earth-years of age, she went with a trade caravan to the Galaxy Police Outpost to trade their goods with the Outsiders for the very first time.

Once Yume saw how the Outsiders traveled to the stars and learned just an inkling of what was out there, she rebelled.

“The old fools!” Yume murmured tearfully. “They were so blind! They were so stubborn to refuse the gift of traveling the Galaxy! We could be a great people... Instead, we scabble in the dirt and mud and prey on stupid beasts.”

Yume was quick to take action. Stealing away in the middle of the night, she left her pack and her home behind. All it took was a single general intelligence examination administered at the GP Outpost. She blew the curve away and the next day was granted a full-ride scholarship to the Galaxy Science Academy.

Once there, Yume continued her streak, blazing a trail through her coursework like woman possessed. But at some point in time, Yume's interest was caught by a fellow student at the academy. He had been every bit as brilliant as she was, and because of this she desired him as a mate. But when Yume had given him her bite, the man had reacted far more poorly than I had – he had nearly killed Yume.

Heartbroken, a more wise and cynical Yume went out, graduated, and stayed on to continue her research and learning.

And then she met Washu.

“That was a trip,” Yume said ruefully. “I'm pretty sure you've seen her when you think she's in high-gear, but that's nothing. I've seen THE Washu Hakubi as a full-blown nut-case. Trust me, handsome. She's mellowed out over the millennia.”

There were anecdotes and stories about what kind of nonsense these two got up to, especially where getting one over Dr. Clay was concerned – those stories were especially outlandish to the point of being noodle-incidents. And then, of course, there was the whole “Washu's Pore” incident. The two, along with Kagato and Yakage, became living legends on the campus.

Eventually, Yume's admiration of Washu overcame her and she had asked if Washu would provide Yume with an ovum, and waxed on about how incredible a child made with their genes would be – how it would become a *tour de force* in the science community... especially if Washu helped her to raise the child.

Washu, while taken aback, was honestly flattered, but ultimately she politely declined. After she had lost her first child to the political machinations of the Kuramitsu family, she had no inclinations to try again with anyone, be they male, female or otherwise.

Soon enough, Washu was made the head of the Science Academy and she and Yume had gone out to celebrate.

The rest, as they say, was history.

She then heard Minagi's tale – admittedly shorter since she had come into being only shortly after Washu and Yume went their separate ways.

Then came my even shorter story.

And then we told her what we knew about Yuki (because she was already sound asleep and thoroughly wrapped around Yume).

“... That blows,” Yume said at last as she smoothed back Yuki's hair to get a better look at her sleeping face. “I can't believe they'd take their own daughter for granted like that. Had she been born in my pack she would have never been neglected. Hell, she'd probably have been one of my contenders for the Matriarch's spot.”

Yume then looked at me. “And you, handsome... oh, the elders would have loved you. Intelligent and pragmatic almost to the point of ruthlessness, yet loving and doting... They would say that you were a gift of the gods and I don't think they would have been too far off the mark. Too bad you couldn't have been born on my world, but then I might have never left.

“And you, Minagi... I'm sorry about what happened before with your father's sword. I had no idea what it really meant to him...”

“We all have regrets, Yume,” said Minagi with a sigh. “All we can do is make a better tomorrow.”

“Yeah,” I said sleepily. “How about we all start by catching at least a few REMs? It's getting early.”

“Best idea I've heard all night,” said Yume.

“Agreed!” replied Minagi.

As we all settled in to sleep, Yume's hand reached my face and turned it to to hers. All at once, she kissed me hungrily, her sharp teeth softly nipping at my lips.

“Hmmm...” sighed Yume. “Not bad. I hope this is indicative of what intimacy with you will be like.”

“Sweet Tsunami, you have no idea!” came Minagi's voice.

I laughed softly at that. “Get some sleep, crazy eyes.”

Yume scoffed. “Same to you, handsome.”

The next morning I learned that Jurai is a waterworld.

Mostly.

There were a few rocky islands, but they were covered with trees, every one of them of Tsunami's descent... not the 'Royal' trees, but the massive, towering variety had held cities and towns within their boughs, and all at nearly stratospheric altitudes where the air was kept breathable only by the trees themselves. But while breathable, it was still very cold, dry air.

No wonder the Juraians all wore such heavily layered robes.

The tallest of the these trees was Tenju - the capital of Jurai and the home of the Imperial Palace. It had its own spaceport, which was where we docked the *Hinase*.

Unfortunately for me, it was winter here on Jurai.

Fortunately, I had access to my entire wardrobe.

So, I went out in style wearing black wool trousers, my favorite cable-knit sweater, a gray trench coat, and a beige, woolen longshoremen's cap with ear protectors. Yuki wore a mock-turtleneck with her jacket and wool skirt, and some light-pink stockings.

Everyone else wore the usual. They were all used to the cold, living up on the mountain. The only reason I wasn't was because I am bred for warm weather. I could only acclimate so much.

We exited *Hinase* and walked over the gangplank and onto an open-air platform that I immediately labeled as a pier in my mind - large, flat, open, and has ships moored to it. Pier.

And waiting for us was none other than the Emperor, as well as his two wives. While Misaki all but tackled her two daughters, Funaho approached us with a smile, and to my surprise she opened up her arms for me.

Smiling back, I gave my adoptive mother a firm hug.

"I'm so glad you're safe, my son," she whispered.

"You and me both," I whispered back.

Funaho and I let go, pausing just long enough to smile at each other, before she then turned to Minagi and Yuki.

"Welcome to Jurai, everyone. I'm glad we're all here together now so we can meet in person at last."

"It is a great privilege to be welcomed in your home, honorable mother," said Yuki formally as she bowed deeply to Funaho. "Please, take good care of me."

Funaho smiled. "Don't worry, Yuki-chan. You are welcome here not only as Garrick's fiance, but as one of my former countrymen. I honestly look forward to getting to know you." Funaho then turned to Minagi, smiling. "Minagi, it's good to see you again as well."

Minagi smiled back and bowed politely. "It's good to be here, your Highness."

Funaho then turned to give Yume a curious look. "Miss Yume," she said cordially. "Is there something I should know about? You seem to be standing unusually close to my son."

Yume all but glared at Funaho. "He isn't off-limits for courting now, is he?"

Funaho gave Yume a wry grin. "Not to my knowledge – that is more for Garrick himself to decide."

"Good," said Yume with a smug grin.

At this, Funaho did lean over and spoke softly. "Although, it would be advisable to comport yourself in a manner that doesn't ruffle too many feathers. His adoption alone is going to stir things up as it is."

Yume looked around Funaho to the Emperor. He only gave a flinty stare right back at her. She then looked back to Funaho giving her a smile, but we all knew the true feelings hidden behind that smile.

"Right," said Yume with a nervous smile. "There shouldn't be any trouble at all."

"That's wonderful to know, Yume," Funaho replied.

"Sooo~oooo, are you Garrick?"

I turned and almost started. Misaki Masaki was hovering right at my shoulder giving me a speculative look.

"Ah. Hello Lady Misaki. Nice to meet you-GHRK!" At that point, Misaki wrapped me in a bone-crushing hug to rival the ones I gave the girls on a regular basis. So, with a smile I returned the hug in full force.

"OOo~wwweeeEEE!" squeaked Misaki. She then let me go, then turned to Funaho. "Okay, you were right about this one Big Sister. He actually gets it. He's a keeper~!"

"So, you really think so, Misaki?" said Azusa suddenly, bringing all attention onto him as he approached. "Garrick Grimm. In person." The Emperor gave me a long and searching look. "When Sasami said we should adopt you, I thought she was simply letting her feelings get ahead of her again. But then Seto took a personal interest... and found you worthy. After that, Funaho decides she needs to see you for herself. And she comes back to tell me about this sad and lost child. And then there is all the stories... How you shrug off your close brushes with death, how fast you learn things, how you bested Yakage and became his student, and how you fight like a cheating bastard and punish your enemies..."

"Minaho has yet to hear from me about her choice of words," Funaho said suddenly, a glower on her face somehow conveying that the scar I gave her would not be sufficient.

Azusa grunted noncommittally. "Indeed. You are fortunate that she drew against you first, young man, or else there would have been serious repercussions. Regardless, I am thankful that you spared her life. Despite her abrasive personality, my Granddaughter is an asset to the Empire. I only wish that her Father had her sense of responsibility."

"I merely desired to teach her a lesson she will not soon forget. If I am to be apart of your household, your Majesty, then I must establish myself as a man to be reckoned with."

"Indeed," Azusa replied in a low tone. "Though I wonder why you played a subordinate role on Ryuten. It does not seem like you to remain in the shadows."

"I do as I must for Tenchi's sake. I already know what it means to take charge. Tenchi does not. I remained aside as much as possible and urged Tenchi toward the limelight so he may gain greater confidence in his capabilities. Would you not say, your Majesty, that Tenchi has acquitted himself rather well?"

"I would," said the Emperor flatly. "Except that it is as you said: you had to push him there."

"All young fledglings need to be pushed out the nest before they learn to fly. I myself was no different when I was younger."

"So I see," Azusa intoned. "Then in that case, I believe you do deserve credit, Tenchi. It should go without saying that it takes courage to open your wings to catch the wind for the first time. And you flew rather well on your first time. It is regrettable that things were interrupted by the likes of Dr. Clay, but even that taken into account you did very well." Azusa then scowled. "Try not to screw up too badly in the future."

Tenchi smiled nervously as Asuza turned to address me directly.

"Garrick Grimm of Earth: a Second Generation Tree of the Royal Line has called upon you to be bonded to it. As is the nature of our trees, you do not have the option to refuse. Given your history, Funaho Masaki Jurai has petitioned the Royal Council to sponsor your adoption into House Masaki and therefore become your legal mother in name. As head of said council, I have given the matter much thought and I have decided to permit your adoption.

"Be warned, Earth Man, that your position in the household will be one that has certain duties and responsibilities entailed, including, but not limited to, military service, holding a political office, and marriage for the sake of furthering the political agenda of the Empire.

"Do you accept, Garrick Grimm of Earth?"

I bowed my head. "I do, your Majesty."

"So be it. The bonding ceremony shall be in three days time. Take that time to prepare yourself." But as he turned away, he subtly added, "Make me proud to call you my son."

"As you will... father." I turned to Funaho and saw that she had an absolutely pleased smile on her face. Misaki, on the other hand, was beaming and her joy would not be contained.

"EEEEEEEE!" she squealed as she suddenly glomped me once more.

"I'msohappyforyou-welcometothefamily!"

I laughed softly and hugged Misaki back while everyone smiled at us. "I'm glad to be here."

After that, we were shown to our quarters and told to take the rest of the day to settle in. Sasami forcibly pulled Yuki and Yume away, saying that under no uncertain terms that they would be spending her first night on Jurai in her personal suite. I was pretty sure that the Juraian equivalent of doujinshi manga would be involved at some point.

Of course, Yume protested, but Yuki was quick to cut her off.

"C'mon Yume-chan!" wheedled the Earth-girl. "How often do you get to pretend to be twelve again?" And with that, Yume reluctantly allowed herself to be hauled off by the princess and the schoolgirl.

Of course, everyone else wanted to be with Tenchi, and that was an entirely different kettle of fish right there.

Minagi and I on the other hand... she and I simply retired to our guest quarters, and immediately began to screw like rabbits trying to repopulate the world after the apocalypse.

Hey, she was the one that started it.

Afterward, Minagi and I found the shared baths for family members. Of course, she and I went in under the full expectation that we would be interrupted. However, we'd already had our fun, so as far as we were concerned it was a non-issue.

Minagi sighed as she slipped into the water with me. "This has been such a nice day so far."

"Yeah," I agreed. "But it'll be even nicer to get the guided tour later on. I'm pretty sure this is going to become home for me, so I need to get to know it."

"Yes," said Minagi as she leaned against me. "But for now, this is nice."

At that point we heard a group of feminine voices approaching. I looked to Minagi and she smiled, nodding her head.

With that, I took a breath and called out, "HOOIII! Male in the bath! Don't come in unless you feel like sharing!"

A pause and then another voice came out as a figure approached. "Do my ears deceive me? My darling grandson in the shared bath?" And then Seto Kamiki Jurai appeared through the mists, clad in nothing more than a bath towel. "Oh this is wonderful!" she said with an absolutely pleased look on her face. "Girls, you can come out now. It's just Garrick. The one I've been telling you about."

"Really? Garrick Grimm?" said another voice as a tall, buxom, green haired woman with sharp features appeared.

"HIM!?" screeched a familiar voice and Minaho Masaki came charging to the fore, her face going red in anger.

"The one that give Auntie Minaho that scar!?! Oh this I must see!" said yet another. An elegant platinum haired woman appeared wearing the smile of the cat that ate the canary.

"Really? That Garrick Grimm?" said one more. A young woman with Japanese features and dark hair appeared - her hair seemed to have a slightly bluish tint to it.

"Good evening everyone," I said hospitably. "It's nice to see you again, Grandmother."

Seto smiled back at me. "Likewise, Grandson."

"So are you just going to ignore me after what happened between us!?" snarled Minaho.

"Honestly, I'd rather not ignore you, Minaho. I regret what happened between us, but that was mostly your fault for insulting me."

Silence.

"You told Seto I was cute," growled Minaho. "She hounded me for weeks because she thought we would be good together."

"You know, big sister, you really should have just joined the Galaxy Army like I did," said the one with the Japanese appearance.

"Big sister?" I parroted. "But... I thought... You're not Kiyone though!"

The girl giggled. "Well, at least you're not mistaking Tennyo here for her mother. I'm Achika, the youngest of Yosho's three daughters."

I felt my eyes bug out. Achika Masaki Jurai!?! But she was never part of the main Tenchi Muyo continuity! Not even in the Mangas - the one time she did appear was a side-continuity story!

"Waituhminute!" I cried out in surprise. "Yosho had three daughters!?! Not two!?"

"Why do I feel left out here?" said the green haired woman. "Of course he had three daughters! I should know - I gave birth to all three of them!"

I blinked and looked at the woman a little more carefully. "Ah. Then you must be Airi. My apologies for not recognizing you right away."

"Oh? What does that mean?"

I looked to Seto. "They don't know yet?"

"Only that you have come across dimensions."

"I see. Ladies... you may want to get settled in first. What I have to say can be a little unsettling."

The ladies all got settled in and I dropped the entire bomb-load on them - what sort of world I came from, how I got here, Washu's theories on Transfictionality, and how their story is a series of anime and manga in my home world. About the only things I didn't tell them were potentially sensitive information about their future and the fact that I was, in essence, an infantile proto-god - didn't want anyone to get the wrong idea, after all. No need for delusions of grandeur here.

"So... you know all our secrets!?" said Minaho with a look of pure horror.

"Not all of them," I soothed, somewhat annoyed myself. "Your personal lives I know little about. You have to understand that Tenchi and the girls back at the Masaki Estate on Earth were the main characters. Though Kiriko and Seina get their own series later on, Tenchi and his group remain the most popular back in my home time-line. The main reason I know as much about you ladies as I do is simply because you show up in Tenchi's life in one way or another. Although you, Minaho, only made a cameo appearance, I did see a lot more of you during Seina's adventures because you were always with Grandmother."

"And that's why you warned my daughter with Sun Tzu," said Airi as she began passing around some sake. "Know your enemy, know yourself indeed."

I nodded in agreement as I accepted one of the small bottles for myself and Minagi, offering it to her first. She accepted and sipped demurely.

"That's part of why I apologized in the first place, Minaho. I did have an unfair advantage in knowing how you'd react once I'd seen you'd become hostile towards me."

Minaho grunted. "Fine, I get it. I shook a bush and instead of getting a quail I got a honey badger, and *then* I began to antagonize it. Got it. Won't *ever* happen again."

Achika then giggled. "My my! Is big sister tsundere for Gar-kun?"

"I AM NOT!" snapped Minaho in outrage.

"Coulda fooled me," I mumbled as I took a sip.

Minaho slid a deadly look in my direction. "...Are you mocking me again, Mr. Grimm?"

"You make it too damn easy," I replied flat-out. "Besides, you should honestly calm down. You're not presenting yourself very well. Even worse: it's a well known fact that love and hate are just flip-sides of the same coin. Quit giving them so much ammunition, dammit."

Seto chuckled heartily as the others made scandalized noises while Minaho fumed impotently.

"Sweet Tsunami's Fruits!" cried out Achika in gobsmacked amusement. She then looked to Minagi. "Is he always like this!?"

Minagi smiled. "Only when someone is annoying him. You should have seen it when he and I first met. I couldn't tell if he was coming or going."

"I heard about it from Yosho," said Airi with a smile. "He got her so wound up she tried killing him."

All the others looked at Minagi in askance.

Minagi blushed. "Well... I was under programming at the time..."

"Hmm..." said Tennyo thoughtfully. "I wonder if that means that Minaho will fall for Garrick next since she tried to kill him?"

"SHUT UP!" snarled Minaho.

Tennyo and Achika then looked to each other and smiled.

"Ho boy," I muttered under my breath.

Suddenly, the two women grabbed Minaho by her arms.

"You know, big sister," said Achika coyly, "it's really unhealthy for you to let your stress accumulate the way you have been lately."

"Oh yes," agreed Tennyo. "You really should relieve that stress. And what better way than with a strong, handsome, and virile man like Garrick here?"

Minaho was horrified as the two began to try and foist her onto me. Seto and Airi laughed uproariously. I sighed and shook my head as I moved towards the struggling trio - Minaho was too focused on fending them off that she didn't notice me coming until I had scooped her up in a bridal carry, causing her to freeze up and squeak adorably.

I gave Tennyo and Achika my best REALLY? look. "That's enough you two," I said as I brought Minaho to my side of the bath and set her between Minagi and I. "Welcome to the Dark Side. We have sense and snarkability here."

The others laughed as Minaho tried to process what the hell just happened. Minagi offered her our bottle of sake. Minaho took it without thinking at first, and then suddenly drank down the entire thing.

"Okay," she said as her cheeks began to flush. "Why in the cursed depths did you do that? I probably could have killed you just now."

I sighed as I stretched out in the bath and leaned back to let myself float.

"Debatable," I stated flatly. "With all the monomolecular reinforcements in my body it would be quite a feat. Though you could probably give me some spectacular deep-tissue bruises. Minaho, even though you are annoying me, I have to admit that I still find you attractive."

"HEEEHHH!?" cried out Minaho as she shot out of the water to give me a startled look.

"Shush, he's not done yet," said Minagi as she pulled her back down into the water.

"You a beautiful woman, Minaho, but the most important thing about you that I like is that you have a lot of passion. Passion is good because when I marry a woman, I want it to be because she burns for me. Just like Minagi and Yuki do."

"Well sorry to disappoint you, but I just don't like you."

"That's fine. Regardless, I just wanted to get you out of reach of your lecherous little sister and niece."

There was a scandalized gasp from Achika. "Did he just..."

"Why yes," said Tennyo with a grin. "Yes he did."

Achika then broke out into a peal of laughter. "Oh wow. I have never met a guy who had the guts to put me down like that, ever! Keep it up and I might fall in love with that sassy mouth of yours."

"Oh, so it's just my mouth she likes," I grumbled.

Minagi giggled. "At least it isn't for the other things you can do with your mouth," she said with a saucy wink. She may have been a lot more demure than her sister, but Minagi was definitely every bit as carnal as Ryoko.

"Did I really need to know that?" said Minaho faintly.

"Yes, you did," said Minagi primly. "He's also excellent with his hands. Why, just earlier today he was running his finger along my -ulp-..." Minagi looked at me in askance as to why I had suddenly reached past Minaho's rather startled face to cover her mouth all the sudden.

In answer, I turned to the other side of the bath. "Tennyo, Achika? You two may wanna take care of those nosebleeds before they contaminate the bath water."

At their shocked expressions and frantic reactions, Seto started laughing so hard that she had to grasp at the edge of the bath, else she'd slip and drown.

Minagi began shaking her head ruefully once I removed my hand. "There you go, Gar-kun. I can never tell if your coming or going once you get like this. And I was your unwitting accomplice. Again!"

I smiled over at Minagi. "You just have a profound sense of naivety," I told her. "Really, it's adorable on you. Besides, you kinda caught me by surprise there, too."

"Okay, you guys got us good there," said Achika once she'd staunched her bleed. "Unwitting accomplice or not. Tennyo and I will play nice now."

"We will?" asked Tennyo innocently. "What a shame."

"We can't have a battle of wits here in the bath, Ten-chan. He's just proven himself a worthy adversary... and a dangerous one, too - Grandmother would have made us scrub the bath if we got any blood in the water."

Tennyo's eyes widened at the sudden realization. She then turned to Seto, who replied with a look of evil intent. Devil Princess of Jurai indeed.

"Good point," Tennyo replied. She then sighed and said, "All joking aside, I personally feel it's only fair to tell you, Garrick: Seto has told us, that is Achika, Minaho, and myself, to consider ourselves marriage candidates for you, and that we should actively pursue you."

"Ahh," I replied. "Honesty. I appreciate that. I really do. So many misunderstandings in life can be averted if people were more straightforward with each other. You, miss Tennyo, have earned some merits in your column.

"On that note, I'd like to ask the three of you a serious question: how do you all feel about that?"

Achika and Tennyo shot a look at Seto, who simply sighed and gave a rather Gallic shrug. They then look to each other and Tennyo decided to go first.

"Really, I'd say that I'm probably the most eligible. I've finished my commission with the Galaxy Police and I was planning on taking some vacation time back on Earth before seeing if Grandma Seto or Grandfather had something for me to do - probably take up command of a flotilla or two. As for how I feel about it..." Tennyo shrugged. "I've known for a while now that I'd probably be asked to consider marriage with someone the Family wants closer ties to. I'm glad that Grandma Seto is trying to set me up with someone like you, though. I mean, you're definitely smart, you have some interesting skills, you're good with children, you tend to avoid fights but when you can't you definitely fight to win, and evidently you're also great in the sack. You don't seem like a bad choice at all, but I'd still like to see what you're really like."

I smiled at Tennyo. "I'm honestly glad to hear that you're willing to give this a try, Tennyo. Whether things work out between us or not, I hope that we at least become good friends."

Tennyo smiled back. "I don't think that will be a problem." She then turned to Achika. "You're turn."

Achika sighed. "Well, I'm a little tied up with my own commission in the Galaxy Army right now, but I'm pretty sure Grandma Seto and Grandma Airi will pull some strings to make sure I have some... free time." For the first time, Achika was starting to look a little disgruntled. "I love what I do right now. I get to beat up bad guys and date hot guys. No worries about obligations to the Royal Family. Hell, I'm going by a moniker right now so I don't have to deal with the stigma of being a princess. Ugh. But anyhow... since it's you... Well, it might be okay for a while since it's you. I mean, you're a pretty interesting guy. You've had it real tough, but you bounced back and got stronger. Grandma Seto also let me see recordings of what happened over on Yatsuka. That was pretty damn good stuff there - you practically bled them dry and at the final confrontation you had them so psyched out they ran with their tails between their legs! Any guy that pulls something like that and makes it look easy has got my interest."

I chuckled at that. "Well, things tend to get a little boring back on the homestead after I got Ayeka and Ryoko to see eye-to-eye on things... but I do have some fun projects. Besides, I could use another super-powered highly trained combatant to help me sharpen my skills. If you'll come along, that is."

Achika raised an eyebrow. "Aren't you afraid of getting hurt?"

I thumbed over at Minagi. "Her dad exploded my heart. You should feel more sorry for Washu – she's the one that has to patch me back together after one of my mishaps. It's become a running gag over there."

Achika snickered. "Okay, you are officially fun. Count me in."

With that, all our eyes turned expectantly to Minaho.

Minaho sighed. "I'm only going because Grandmother Funaho, as head of House Masaki, has ordered me to do so that I may gain an appreciation for the part of my heritage I've been neglecting." Minagi gently nudged Minaho in the ribs. Minaho glared at her, but Minagi never wavered, simply giving her a Mona Lisa smile.

"Oh fine!" Minaho declared in exasperation. "He is attractive. Tsunami's sake, he should have been a damn underwear model. Instead, he fixes relationships, makes swords, fights armies, and even helps birth babies! What else does he do!? Walk on water!?"

I winced at that, but then thought about it for a second. "You know, that might be fun to do just so I can fuck with people's heads. By the way, how do you know about that?"

"Primer to Earth Cultures," stated Minaho flatly. "Required reading for all members of the Royal Family thanks to the Emperor."

"Natch," I quipped.

"Anyhow, whether I like it or not, I guess I have to go. Just don't you dare start walking on water or else, sacrilege or not, I *will* kill you."

"By all means, you're welcome to try," I said glibly. "A season back home just isn't complete until someone, intentionally or not, makes an attempt on my life."

Minaho blinked. "Is he being serious?"

Minagi hummed thoughtfully as she cast her eyes upwards, as though a list of events hung in the air over her head.

"Let's see, when he first got here Ryoko accidentally broke his neck, and then a little bit later Mihoshi accidentally shattered about half his ribs. About there, Washu and Garrick decided to enhance his durability. So that's why with the monomolecular reinforcements in his body. Then there was that assassination attempt by a country on Earth called Iran. And then I showed up and..." Minagi then blushed. "Well, you know. And then my creator, Yakagi, exploded his heart... Also there was the guy that tried to kidnap Yuki. And then there was you, Minaho, and then Yume and her minions and then that freak, Dr. Clay..."

Minagi paused then gave me a look. "You've been busier than usual. You should be good for about a year now."

"My my," purred Seto. "It seems my dear grandson is a magnet for trouble!"

I snorted at that. "Grandmother, even before I got here, Murphy's Law loved me like a redheaded stepchild."

Seto tilted her head to the side. "I'm afraid I don't get the reference."

"Ah, sorry. Two pop-cultural references in one. The first part being Murphy's Law, a set of adages coined by technicians in the army of the USA. Basically, it states that anything that can go wrong, will go wrong.

"As for the redheaded stepchild bit, that has to do with a racial slur against the Irish people back on Earth - they are known for a strong genetic predisposition for the most outrageously fiery red hair you can imagine. A redheaded stepchild implied that a woman had an illegitimate child by an Irishman before she got married, and back when racism was more widespread on Earth the Irish weren't looked upon kindly. Such children were usually harshly beaten for even perceived slights by their stepfathers.

"So, combine Murphy's Law and 'redheaded stepchild' as I do, and what do you get?"

Achika giggled. "Someone the universe seems to hate."

Airi laughed. "I have to admit. That's a pretty colorful way to describe it."

Minaho just gave me an astounded look, then shook her head. "You know what, I give up. The universe hates you, and that's good enough for me. I think that from now on I'll just sit back and enjoy the show."

Eventually, we all decided to leave the bath en masse. As we moseyed down Tenju's great open-air walkways, warm and light headed from the steam and the sake, we all chatted amiably about anecdotes from our various walks of life. Slowly but surely, though, the others began to split off, going their own ways one by one, each saying their goodbyes for the evening as they did so.

Eventually, it was only Minagi, myself, and Achika.

"...so that night, instead of being put to bed with a shot of NyQuil, little Timmy got knocked out with a shot of bourbon liquor instead and acquired his first taste for booze at the tender age of ten!"

Minagi and Achika cracked up at that and I paused, pulling them short.

"Our room is here, Achika. Will we be seeing you tomorrow?"

"You could say that," said Achika with a coy smile on her face. "So, are you going to invite me in or what?"

That stopped me dead in my tracks.

"Well," I said at length, "that depends on what you have in mind."

Achika sighed in disappointment, but then smiled weakly as she said, "Well, I guess I can try being honest since it worked so well for Tennyo. The truth is I'm still turned on because of what Minagi said about what you guys do together... And I know she doesn't mind the idea of company... So I was kind of hoping you wouldn't mind tending my garden for a bit."

God I love that euphemism. Oh so smutty, yet so very subtle to the uninitiated. You could practically encode an entire conversation of dirty talk in polite company that way.

That aside, though... I sighed. "Achika, I do like you, but I'd feel a little uncomfortable going that far that quickly with you. I mean, it's not like this is going to be a one night stand where we never see each other again."

Achika suddenly looked sheepish. "Sorry. Bad habit of mine."

I gave her a sympathetic smile. "Let me guess: didn't even have a chance to hit up the port when your summons came?"

She suddenly laughed despite herself. "How'd you guess?"

"I used to be in the US Navy, remember?"

"Oh right! You mentioned that..." What little energy she'd gathered then tapered off. "Well... I guess I should head on over to my suite."

"Hold on there," I said, placing a hand gently on her shoulder. "I said that sex was off the table. I didn't say that we would mind it if you stayed the night with us."

Achika then gave Minagi a surprised look. "Really? But I thought that you two would..."

Minagi chuckled. "I already had my fun for today. Though I admit I wouldn't mind watching, but Garrick is pretty tired after what I put him through."

I then leaned over and stage-whispered to Achika. "Word of warning - she may be sweet, but that woman is a *monster* between the sheets. Totally insatiable."

Minagi shot me an amused scowl. "That's not true and you know it. Otherwise..." Her grin turned absolutely bestial. "...I would never let you leave the bedroom."

"See?" I said to Achika. "A monster!"

And then all three of us broke up into helpless giggles at that.

"Nicely played," said Achika as she got herself back together again. "I can't believe you two have only been together for a few months. It's like you're in each others heads!"

I shrugged. "Minagi and I..." I looked to her and she smiled.

"Garrick is easy to read once you know the signs to watch for. And I am more than content to let him take up the lead while I supplement. As you noticed, it has its advantages."

"I see. That is a deceptively simple dynamic you two share. I wonder what kind of dynamic I'll share with you, Garrick?"

I smiled back at Achika. "Let's go inside and find out."

We settled into the comfortably large bed that the suite had been appointed with. Despite Minagi and I having thoroughly messed it up earlier, it had been made up while we were away by the servants. I made a mental note to find a way to make sure they knew their service was appreciated.

With a round of refreshments procured, and a frosty-cold pitcher not too far away, I asked Achika if she would mind terribly if she told us about her life.

She gladly obliged.

She had been born in the late '50s as I would recognize it, and not far behind her niece, Tennyo. (Though by my accounting it turns out this was actually more like ten years, which is 'nothing' by the Juraian perspective.)

She grew up as a normal, if gifted young girl - top marks in all her classes, beautiful, kind, demure... a genuine nadeshiko yorishiku in the making. However, Tennyo and Achika were two peas in a pod. Even though they were really aunt and niece, they loved each other like sisters. So, when Tennyo decided that she would go into space, the secrets of the Masaki family had to be revealed to Achika fairly early on.

Achika took it all very well, though she was somewhat embittered by Tennyo leaving her alone, as it were. She had vowed then that she would never break anyone's heart by saying goodbye like that, and in order to do that she would never leave Earth - instead, she wanted to live and die like a human.

And so, for a few more years, Achika did just that. She went to school, studied hard, and worked towards getting into a good university.

Of course, somewhere along the way she fell in love with a boy at her school.

They dated for some time and it seemed like they would be getting serious with each other... that was until the entity known enigmatically as Kaine showed up to take revenge on the Masaki family, starting with Achika.

It was not at all like in any of the other continuities. Achika did not have access to some strange power of her own like in the anime. She didn't even have the benefit of being bonded to a Royal Tree. Achika was utterly powerless and was gravely injured in Kaine's assault during a class trip to Tokyo Tower.

Fortunately, Tennyo, who *had* been bonded to a Royal Tree and was serving in the Galaxy Police, came to her rescue and destroyed Kaine before he could do permanent harm.

But really, the damage had been done. Achika had to convalesce for some time in a hospital and her boyfriend broke up with her.

At this point, Achika had an about-face and decided that as soon as she was out of high school that she would go into space. But not to join the Galaxy Police or become bonded to a Royal Tree.

Achika went out and joined the Galaxy Army, and never looked back.

Ever since then, she had been leading a promising career in the Galaxy Army's Hostage Rescue Team. Achika loved every minute of it - the carefully laid plans, contingencies and counter-contingencies... but most of all, the comfort in knowing that the people you were taking down were most certainly bad people, and getting to be a Big Damn Hero at the end of the day.

So, she was no longer the Japanese ideal of a perfect woman. While she was sweet, kind, and caring, she was also so much more. She killed bad guys, saved people in danger, partied, got drunk, and even went out and shagged some lucky guy that happened to catch her eye, all while avoiding entanglements with her estranged family and their enemies.

"So, what about you, Garrick?" asked Achika as she lounged languidly against my chest, her head next to Minagi's as she did the same on my opposite side.

I sighed and plunged ahead. I told her everything there was to know about me, my dysfunctional family, how I grew up, my watershed moments... the strange truth is that for all my violent tendencies, I have a deeply gentle side as well. My mother had told me before that in my youngest years, I was always such a sweet, gentle, and playful child. It wasn't until later when I had to integrate into other social circles that I became moody and combative.

I told her about how my step-father and I never really got along. I was a dreamer and did my best learning organically. My step-father, though, was the polar opposite - all discipline and synthetic learning. Even worse, he envied me for the close relationship I had with my mother - until I was four, she and I had toughed things out together and we had bonded on a level few mothers do with their sons. She and I, we were more than just Mother and Son. We were confidants, comrades, and co-conspirators. And dad could never get over how easy it was for me to engage her in something or other.

I told her about how we moved frequently, how hard that made life for me. I told her about my trials and failures at striking out on my own and about my first loves. I told her about my time in the US Navy, how I both excelled and failed in that as well.

And then how I let myself get sucked back into my family's dysfunction and how it took me four years to break free of it... and even then it would still haunt me.

As much as I loved my family, they had hurt me so horribly.

I felt my hand being squeezed and I looked down to find Achika giving me a tearful expression. Minagi herself had positioned herself against a pile of pillows so she could better judge Achika's reactions. She knew my history already.

It was then I had an epiphany.

I was, at last, ready to close the door on my old life. For all the love and sorrow it held for me, for all that it had molded me, I was ready to let it go, because right then I realized that I had these beautiful women with me who actually cared.

I was surprised when Achika suddenly came up and gave me a gentle, probing kiss.

"What are you thinking?" she asked, her tone plainly curious, but her face a mask of worry.

I reached up and gently caressed her face. "Seeing you, I realized... it's over now. I can stop being sad about it. Because... heh... Sasami-chan's wish came true. I have a new family now. And my family not only *wants* me to be happy... that want to *help* me be happy."

Achika smiled, though a bit ruefully. "Funny. I'm used to having an effect on guys, but this is the first time it's ever been something *that* profound."

I gave an amused scoff. "Well, if it helps any, it's not all that often a woman has that effect on me. Anyhow, now that you've heard all about me, what do you think now?"

Achika smiled. "I stand by what I said about you before. You've had it rough, but you've bounced back and got stronger. Even if it was with help that takes a lot, and I've never heard of anyone doing that by themselves without becoming damaged goods of some sort. You're not only strong, but you're lucky, too. And what about me?"

I smiled at Achika. "You remind me of a strong and beautiful woman I once knew with a lot of fire in her belly and a heart as soft as they come. She was very loyal to her family and friends and gladly go down fighting for them."

Achika made a downcast look at that. "I don't know about the loyal part. I left my family behind and cut ties. This is the first time I've actually been to Jurai."

"You weren't being disloyal," I told her matter-of-factly. "You got blindsided by life and you discovered that the person you were portraying wasn't really you, so you had to go out and find yourself. Your father certainly knew what he saw and did nothing to stop you because the same thing happened to him a long time ago."

Achika gave me a stunned look. "Okay, are you somehow related to Budha? Do I need to rub your stomach for good luck or something?"

Minagi smiled and added her two cents. "Garrick is something better than that. He's a real person, someone you can actually talk to and get some straight answers from him. He's very approachable. In fact, if you kiss him right now he'll kiss you back, because he likes you already."

I shot a look at the pirate. "Minagi!"

"Oh no you don't!"

Suddenly, Achika grabbed my head, directed it towards her face - which wore a cheerfully determined expression - and promptly pulled me into a steamy kiss.

And yes, I did kiss back.

Achika broke off for only a moment to look me in the eyes. "I'll win my place in your heart next to Minagi. You have my word, Garrick." And with that, she went in again.

Eventually, I got Achika to settle down. Minagi simply chuckled at the sight of her completely knocked out and curled up at my side.

I shot a look at her and she knew exactly what was on my mind.

Minagi smiled back and whispered in my ear, "In some ways, she is you. So sweet, so gentle, so loving... and she also has fire like you - an anger that you will only express as true and righteous fury in the face of injustice. And yet, despite everything it is all a facade to cover up the frightened little girl she has been ever since that fateful day Kaine attacked her. And she has never met another like her... until she met you. In fact, she may have already fallen in love with you before she met you." Minagi then kissed me softly. "You had no idea how right you were about her, Garrick."

I blinked. It suddenly made sense. All the bluster, the tough talk, combined with the seemingly ambivalent interest in myself... I was honestly a sucker for these types of girls. The Japanese may fawn over girls that were outwardly moe. I can see the attraction... but I like the idea of an inwardly moe girl - of helping someone that helps themselves only to break down and bawl their eyes out after the fact. And there's also the inherent attraction in someone that can keep a bad situation from coming apart at the seams until help can get there.

"Thanks for bringing that to my attention," I said as I hugged Minagi with the arm that was already wrapped around her. "It would have taken me a while to figure that out. How could you tell, anyhow?"

Minagi grinned at me. "Silly boy. Like I said, she's just like you."

I sighed and smiled as I looked down at Achika's peacefully sleeping face, and then snuggled her closer, giving her a kiss on the head. She murmured something affectionate and continued to sleep.

It would take time to coax her out of her shell, but I would in time. I could not be direct about it. I can't even hint about it. All I could do was provide the openness and security she needs to lay her armor down... and only once she does could I encourage her to be her true self in the open.

And in the same vein of being true to one's self... The first chance I got, I would put away all the reminders of my hurt and my pain - the mementos of the family of my past. The only concession I would allow would be my books, a photograph of my mother, and nothing more. That would be all the reminder I needed.

I wouldn't bury my past... but I would permit it to fade into obscurity. What I had then and there was all that really mattered.

With that matter settled in my mind, one other thing occurred to me.

"Minagi?"

"Hmm?"

"Why is it that I keep getting all these girls that have some sort of deep and unresolved hurt in their past?"

"I suppose like calls to like," Minagi replied casually. "Although it might have more to do with your gentle nature."

"Maybe," I mused thoughtfully. No more was said on the matter and we drifted off to sleep.

That morning I was woken up with a rude reminder of what exactly that hurt little girl was hidden under - suffice to say, protein milkshakes are now officially dirty talk in the House of Grimm. Of course, Achika was just trying to get me all wound up, and not simply in the 'hot and bothered' department. I'd almost call it cute if not for the perversion factor involved. Minagi found it utterly hilarious.

As soon as we all made ourselves decent, though, there was a knock at our door. Upon opening it, I found Funaho standing there, so I promptly gave her a hug.

"Good morning, mother," I said as she hugged back.

Funaho chuckled as she let go of me. "It is going to take a while to get used to the fact that I now have another son." Her expression then took on a surprised look right before she smiled again. "Achika. I should have known."

I stood aside and Funaho walked in to confront the younger woman, who was looking a little bit nervous at her prospects.

"Well then, granddaughter... did you enjoy yourself last night?" she said, not unkindly, but with a certain weight to it. She then went on, "You're fortunate that I caught on to your antics early on. If word got out that you spent the night with Garrick then it would have been scandalous." Her expression then became somewhat hurt. "I go through all sorts of trouble to make sure your promiscuity remains tied solely to your alias. And you never call, never write..."

Achika, however, was having none of that, though. "Grandmother, please stop grandstanding. Honestly, if I did that as often as I wanted to then my identity would have been compromised, and then we'd have to go through all sorts of trouble to make sure that Ayeka never heard about it."

I blinked, then said, "Well, it's kind of a moot point now that she's found Yoshō, isn't it?"

Funaho nodded. "It is. In fact, we've been looking for a reason to call you back from active duty. Garrick once again has proven his worth." Funaho's smile then turned a bit sly. "So, how did things go between you two last night?"

I smiled and shook my head. In reply, I simply went over to Achika and, much to her surprise, gave her a hug and a quick kiss in front of Funaho.

"Heeeehhhhhh?" said Funaho in a pleased tone.

I held Achika's hand in mine as I let her go, her face flushed as I smiled at her, then Funaho.

"We still need a bit of time, Mother, but for the moment... I'd say Achika has won her place in my heart."

Funaho beamed at the pronouncement. "Wonderful! Seto will be so pleased to know..." She then gave us a conspiratorial grin. "Of course, you do know that's not going to stop her from foisting even more eligible women onto you, right?"

I grinned. "Bring on the bachelorettes. They won't even know if I'm coming or going."

Funaho guided us all down to a largish dining hall... only to find chaos and confusion.

Ayeka, Sasami, and Ryoko had been struck completely dumb.

Yuki, Yume, Washu, Mihoshi, and Ryo-Ohki were merely confused.

Tenchi was in a positively incandescent fury.

Minaho was fuming.

Seto was contemplative, looking as though something had not quite gone according to plan and was in the middle of working out exactly where it had gone wrong.

Misaki was nearly on the verge of tears

In the middle of it all was poor Tennyo, looking like the kid that just got caught with a book of matches in the wake of a massive fire.

And last, but certainly not least, was Emperor Azusa himself.

"What is the meaning of all this!?" he bellowed irately.

"Your Majesty, if I may?" I asked politely.

The Emperor cut a sharp look at me, but nodded his head regardless.

"Right... Now, someone stop me if I'm wrong at any point here... Tennyo, you decided to go ahead and hit Tenchi with that whole crazy put on your mother concocted before she passed away, right?" Tennyo blushed and nodded slowly. "Of course, since you're the spitting image of your mother, Tenchi fell for it, hook, line and sinker... that is, until someone else came along, probably Minaho, and blew Tennyo's cover. And now, Tenchi is upset that you would mess around with his feelings like that."

"But what would the point be in such a ruse?" grumbled the Emperor.

I shrugged. "It pains me to say so, your Majesty, but your Granddaughter, Kiyone Masaki, had a horrifically perverse sense of humor. Even Washu-chan and myself at our very worst couldn't match Kiyone for her utterly outrageous antics."

"But..." came Tenchi's voice all the sudden. "...That can't be true! My mother was a very kind and gentle person!"

I sighed at that. "Tenchi, you're confusing your mother for Reia. You remember her, right? She took care of you the most after your mother passed away."

"Of course I remember her!" snapped Tenchi. "Reia is like another... mother... to me... Oh."

I nodded. "Yup. And Kiyone made sure of that, too, by teaching her everything she knew about house keeping and raising little boys."

Tenchi leveled a sharp glare at me. "You could have warned me about this."

"And have you be angry at me for a perceived lie about your mother?" I said sharply.

"I would have believed you!" Tenchi snapped back.

"You would have?" I challenged.

Tenchi faltered at last. "...Maybe not... if we had just met, anyways."

I sighed myself. "I guess I could have mentioned something sooner... I just never expected Tennyo to show up so soon. I apologize for the lapse, I should have realized that the Butterfly Effect might blow this way."

"At last, someone that can make sense of things here," said the Emperor in relief. "I am now starting to see the value in having you adopted into House Masaki."

I gave everyone a sheepish look at that. It honestly wasn't all that complicated once you knew the backstory, though I guess that even for some of the family members things like this could come off as impenetrable.

In short, it was kinda embarrassing to be praised for being a voyeur, even if it wasn't really meant to be as such.

I kept my mouth shut on the matter and decided to facilitate *proper* introductions. But that only lasted as long as me getting to Achika.

Good thing I saved her for last, because Yuki pounced on her right away.

"I GET ANOTHER SISTER-WIFE! YES!"

The other Juraians shot me a curious look and I just shrugged. "Yeah, she can be like that."

Yuki interjected right away. "Well, it's just that I've always wanted to have a big family with lots of sisters. Even though I had friends at school it always felt so lonely at home."

Achika smiled and pulled Yuki up off her feet. "Don't worry, Yuki-chan. I've always wanted an imouto, too!"

Yuki gave Achika a sharp look. "Hey, just remember I saw him before you!"

"But you're still the youngest," Achika cheerfully countered. "But don't worry, that just means that you'll be the cutest bride out of all of us!" Yuki blushed and Achika laughed. "Oh you are so easy to tease! You're gonna be the best imouto-chan ever!"

"So, it seems you've made your choice," Yume said quietly to me.

I shrugged. "Its... complicated."

Yume snorted and gave me a sidelong look. "Is it?"

I sighed. "I think Achika and I hit things off because we have the best understanding of each other. In fact... we all seem to share a common theme of painful histories. You might want to spend a bit of time talking with her. It'll help the both of you to share the hurt."

"What about you?" asked Yume.

"All of you, including Achika, already know why I hurt. And I've already heard everyone's story." I smiled as Yuki and Achika continued to bicker playfully and shook my head. "You see that? That's the way we need to be."

Yume nodded her head. "Reminds me of the good days... before I left home."

"Do you ever want to go back?" I asked.

"Sometimes," Yume replied. "But I don't belong there anymore. If I do go, it'll be to take my pups out on their first hunt so they can know where they came from. Pretty sure you'd do the same."

I nodded my head as well. "I'd definitely want my children to see my home. I come from a city unique in my entire world – maybe even the entire galaxy. It's a beautiful city dedicated to heroes of a bygone era."

"Heroes, huh? What did they do?"

"They died in the face of an implacable foe." Yume gave me a surprised look – you could tell she was wondering how that could be heroic. I gave her a small smile – the Battle of the Alamo is never a happy tale to tell. "I'll tell you about it later. It's the kind of stuff legends are made of."

Yume nodded and went to join Achika and Yuki.

I myself took a place next to Ayeka at the table. Minagi gave me a puzzled look, but she seemed to understand that I had business with my adoptive sister as I started speaking to her using Old High Juraian in low, imperceptible tones.

"Dear Sister, I was wondering if you could help me out with something."

Ayeka gave me a slightly surprised look. "What could that be, Dear Brother?"

"I understand that when you were little you used to get around Tenju by climbing the outer walls of the palace."

Ayeka went cherry red but tried to act naturally regardless. "I... Dear Brother, I have done no such thing since I was but the smallest of children! Not even Beloved Little Sister knew of it."

"But you still know of the skills needed and the routes, yes?"

"I do... though there may have been some changes. Why in the Great Tree's name would you want to know such things?"

“Because, Dear Sister, I know that our Beloved Grandmother is about to foist every eligible girl in Tenju onto me in an effort to entertain herself and draw me closer into the family. I don't mind entertaining Grandmother, but I would like to set a high standard for any woman that pursues me.”

Ayeka's face lit up in enlightenment. “So I see! In that case, Dear Brother, meet me at my personal suite in one hour's time. Make sure you dress in warm, sturdy clothes.”

“Thank you, Dear Sister.”

Ayeka smiled. “Think nothing of it, Dear Brother... And not one word to anyone!”

Like mother, like daughter.

Climbing the walls of Tenju is an art that's been passed down through the Kamiki line for generations. Ayeka learned from her own mother, Misaki. And Misaki learned from her mother, Seto. I have no idea who Seto learned from, but it was undoubtedly from one of the more eccentric Kamiki family women when she was no more than a child herself.

It was a rare thing for an outsider to ask to be taught, but Ayeka found me to be an acceptable student, not only because of my pre-existing skills as a traceur, but also because I was her brother.

It was actually a lot easier than you might imagine. Tenju is a tree – a massive tree with branches large enough to be runways for commercial airliners, but still a tree. And this meant that there was always a branch nearby. That combined with all the window ledges, balconies, and myriad other protrusions made Tenju a traceur's paradise.

All it had taken was just a few hours that morning for me to get the hang of it, and Ayeka herself was impressed.

“Have you always been such a good climber?” Ayeka asked after we arrived back in her suite through her own balcony.

“No,” I replied honestly. “I always preferred trees that had a large number of hand- and foot-holds. There were others more daring than I. But then I became a traceur and my skill level rose considerably.”

“Well, it certainly seems to have helped. Do you feel confident in this helping you?”

I grinned at Ayeka. “How many of these girls do you think Grandmother has taught to do this?”

Ayeka smiled and shook her head. “I see your point – it is something of a secret art, isn't it?”

I grinned back. “And Grandmother will derive no end of entertainment from seeing all those pretty little faces going spare at my daring escapes.”

My education had come not a moment too soon. I was on my way back to my guest suite for a quick shower when a group of lovely young women of various shapes and sizes spotted me.

“There he is! It's the Earthman!” squealed one girl.

“Oh Mr. Grimm!”

“Garrick Grimm! Marry Me!”

I just smiled and vaulted the edge.

>>Professor Longhair – Big Chief (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0UWBO4r11AY>)

>>Start: 0:11

Right away the girls all screamed in terror, undoubtedly rushing to see what they thought would be a fall to my death. Instead, I alley-ooped off a window ledge and then another, onto a balcony, and I was off.

Just as I thought, the girls all squeed and took off after me, trying to find the fastest 'normal' route.

I startled a couple of chambermaids as I tore through the suite attached to the balcony.

“Lord Grimm!?” they cried out in shock.

“Thank you ladies for your wonderful service!” I called back glibly before I went through the open door to the hallway inside... only to run into another group of girls that all cried out in joyful surprise!

I didn't stop. Instead, I went right through the next guest suite across the hall and vaulted off the balcony railing, and touching down on a limb so thick I didn't even shake it. I turned back and tossed off a jaunty salute before I started running towards the main trunk.

However, once I was certain I was out of sight of the ladies, I decided to cheat a bit and used the Emergency Escape function of my C-Space, dropping myself through the instant hatch and into my own common space.

With a quick adjustment, I made my front door appear in the dining hall where we had breakfast earlier, startling the serving staff as I exited and then dismissed my door.

“Afternoon folks! What's for lunch?”

I didn't get a chance to hear because we were interrupted by the first group of girls.

“There he is!”

“HE'S SO COOL!”

“I WANT HIS CHILDREN!”

“Whoah!” I said fervently and then took off at a dead sprint, vaulting through an open window. I bounced through a series of branches and found myself touching down in a large open space.

“WHAT IS THE MEANING OF THIS!?” bellowed a voice. I turned and there was Emperor Azusa, standing before his throne in outrage. “GRIMM!?”

“Ah!” I said in honest surprise and I bowed humbly. “My abject apologies, your Majesty...”

“He's in the throne room!” echoed a girl's voice from behind a set of large doors. “Quickly! Get the logic probe!” Comprehension dawned on the Emperor's face and he shot me a deeply concerned look.

“Don't just stand there, boy!” he snapped. “There's a servant's lift behind that root in the corner! Run!”

He didn't need to tell me twice! I dashed for the lift and was immediately caught up in some sort of gravity field that lifted me up through the passage and into a chamber filled with tables stacked with folded linens. The castle staff all got out of my way as I then dashed for the nearest exit, and right into yet another group of girls.

I sputtered a laugh as I cheesed it down the hall, squealing girls running after me. I sprinted up a grand staircase, taking the steps three at a time and leaving the girls behind. Once I was out of their sight, I vaulted out a window on one of the landings and started climb down.

>>2:10

As I reached a balcony below I was just beginning to think that I was safe for the moment... That was, until one of the girls suddenly slammed into the balcony right in front of me, feet first, and sprung back up with her arms spread wide and a shit-eating grin on her face. I halfway expected to see 'Perfect 10!' start flashing over her head.

“JESUS H. CHRIST!” I yelped in shock. “Are you from planet Krypton or something!?”

The girl gave me a clueless look – of course she wouldn't get the reference! Regardless, I used the distraction to get away from her, vaulting from one terrace to the next, and dashing into the next open door I found.

>>2:30

I found that I was in what looked like a ballroom. The faint scent of food cooking caught my nose and I followed it, quickly finding myself in the kitchens and being eyeballed by the staff.

“Gar-kun! What are you doing here!?” I turned and found Sasami-chan in her carrot apron and bowl of batter in her hands.

“Grandmother set the bachelorettes on me, Sasami-chan,” I said with a smile. “Got any cooking oil I can borrow?”

Her face lit up in glee and she darted off, and then quickly returned with a plastic bottle with a nozzle on the end filled with oil.

“You're the best little sister ever!” I said giving the little princess a quick hug.

“I know,” Sasami said impishly. I then made a hasty exit because I hated to bring the chaos that was following me into the kitchens.

I wound up in the foyer to the ballroom when the girls found me again – this time it seemed that the all the groups had converged together. Once again, I cheesed it as fast as my legs could carry me and rounded a corner. Once I did, I turned around and frantically started spraying the floor with the cooking oil Sasami had given me, quickly emptying the bottle.

And not a moment too soon as the girls all rounded the corner like a flock of birds... and almost as one, they all went down in a squealing, screaming, tangled heap on limbs.

“Looks like you're having fun,” said a voice behind me. I turned and found Achika giving me a wicked grin. “I like the way you think, but I have a better method. C'mon, follow me!” And with that, she grabbed my hand and dragged me over to an anti-gravity lift that sent us both rocketing upwards.

It left us off at a wide, open platform. A few feet away were some strange looking rigs. I couldn't quite make out what they were because they blended in with the leaves around us, but as Achika led me closer to them I realized that they were hang gliders made with giant leaves.

“Can you fly one of these?” she asked.

“Never have,” I replied honestly. “Pretty sure I could pick it up quickly, though.”

“Better get a tandem, then,” she said as she went for a larger glider. “Hurry up – we want to be airborne before they get up here and start getting *ideas*.” With expert hand, Achika quickly made the glider ready for flight while I watched carefully, mentally noting everything she did.

<http://homestuck.bandcamp.com/track/ecstasy>

Soon enough, we were ready to launch, perched at the edge of the platform with the wind tugging at the wings.

Achika looked to me and must have seen that I was a little bit nervous. “You ready?” she asked.

“Yeah, just some jitters. I'll be good once I get going. On three?”

Achika smiled and nodded her head. “On three.”

I nodded back, then smiled at her as together we suddenly yelled “THREE!”

Gravity tried, but it didn't even have a chance. We dropped maybe half a meter before the updraft caught hold and sent us rocketing upwards and I whooped from the thrill while Achika laughed hysterically.

“I honestly thought I had you there!” said Achika mirthfully as we rose, shifting the bar to the right and causing us to bank left and keep us in the updraft.

I laughed. “Well, where I come from it's an old but treasured joke. I figured you might try and get me with it.”

Right then, I couldn't help but notice how close we were. This tandem's sling didn't have a dividing wall between passenger and pilot, so it must have been made with couples in mind. Not that I minded, though. In fact, it was nice to feel the warm softness of Achika's body alongside mine. With a smile, I let go with the hand next to her and gently draped it over her shoulder.

Achika gave me a smile. "It'll be hard to control this glider like this."

I grinned back at her. "So I guess we'll have to work together then."

"But you don't know how," Achika countered coyly.

"I told you I'm a fast learner," I retorted. "Just tell me what to do."

Achika gave me a challenging look. "This could be a problem... you know, you being stubborn like this."

"I know," I replied as my smile melted into a more gentle one. "But you also know I'd never go out of my way to hurt anyone that I love."

"Do you love me?" asked Achika as she gave me the bedroom eyes. Before I knew it, she put her arm around me as well and we pulled each other into a short, but passionate kiss.

"The seed has been planted," I said as she took a quick glance around to reorient herself. "Let us be patient and see what grows from it."

Achika giggled. "I would never have thought that someone would have gotten to you with the old love poems already! Who was it?"

"Ayeka, of course," I replied gamely. "She felt that I should know about the great romances of Jurai if I was to court a woman of her homeworld."

"I should have known," she replied with a roll of her eyes. She then gave me a smile. "Well, I'll let you in on a little secret... despite my tough-girl exterior, I'm really a sucker for romance. Keep that shit up and I'll be ripping your clothes off in no time."

I chuckled and gave Achika a squeeze. "I'll keep that in mind, milady."

I can say without hesitation that hang gliding with Achika was an absolute blast. So much so that I resolved to start taking lessons when we got back to Earth. I was pretty certain that I could get some amazing ridge lift and mountain wave lift out in Okayama.

Achika and I had landed the glider and we were on our way back into Tenju, giddy and warm together despite the sharp chill of the outside air. Suddenly, she darted into a deeply shaded cranny, pulling me in with her, and then her lips were on mine as she kissed me hungrily, her breath heavy against my face.

The sheer immediacy of her passion caught me completely off guard and all I could do was just go with it, holding her firmly to myself as I kissed her back and waited for her to calm down.

Eventually she pulled away and I got my chance.

"Is something wrong?" I whispered.

"No, not really," she replied a bit sheepishly. "I really did want to do that... but it doesn't help that I just saw two of those girls that were chasing you earlier."

I smiled at her gently as I cupped the side of her face in one hand. "I see... looks like this is something I need to nip in the bud once and for all."

"Garrick... can't we just stay here like this?"

"They'll find us soon enough," I countered. "Don't worry, though. There'll be plenty of time for us after I take care of this. You have my word, my precious little princess."

Achika gave me a glare. "That 'princess' thing is a mere technicality."

I grinned back at her. "Oh, if I gotta do the whole 'Royal Duty' thing, then so do you."

Achika then grinned with saccharine sweetness. "Okay then, duty boy. Go do your duty."

And just like that, she shoved me out of the cranny, and I couldn't help but laugh. Of course, this meant I was spotted by the two scouts. And soon enough, the rest of the horde was on my tail.

I have to admit, this was exhilarating like nothing else I had ever experienced. It's one thing to be chased down by the horror-terrors of the universe out for your blood. It's another to be running from about three-dozen girls who want you in only the most primal way imaginable.

Now I know how The Beatles must have felt sometimes as they ran with grins plastered on their faces from screaming girls.

What's kind of a shame, though, is that I'd feel safe placing good money on the odds that at least half of these girls would have no idea what to do with me if they ever got their hands on me. It's like a dog hounding someone for being too close to their home. If they ever do get out, all they do is run up to the person and just keep right on barking. They have no real direction, which is kinda sad in a ways.

In fact...

I pause for just a moment and get a good look at all the girls pursuing me.

Just as I thought. Not one of them looks older than eighteen. Grandmother is certainly a very naughty woman.

It was time to end this. I slapped my C-Pod and called out, "Two-count Type-1 Goobers!"

They were really called personnel-class restraining plasmoid nanite colonies. I like to call them goo bombs, or goobers for short. I cooked up a variety of these things with Washu's help. She cackled wickedly at some of the ideas I had, like the Type-6 which had irritant properties similar to poison ivy, or the Type-17 which dissolves clothing and armor of all types.

The Type-1, though, was the kindest. It merely glued everyone in its explosive radius into place with transparent strands of goo. It wouldn't hurt anyone, although it would hold a person as effectively as the GP's full body restraint device.

Two grenade-like devices dropped into my hands and I thumbed the buttons. They began making a series of electronic clicks that sped up in frequency at a geometric rate. Just before it reached a steady whine, I turned and threw the two Goobers into the midst of the girls hunting me.

They never had a chance.

With a pair of concussive pops, a mass of sticky strands shot out from where the goobers landed and rooted every single girl into place.

An uproar of feminine shock and surprise died down to ruefulness and revulsion.

"That's enough, all of you!" I called out and the girls suddenly fell silent, save for a few isolated whimpers. "I know that you've all heard stories of me from someone, somewhere. I know that you must all be unattached and marriageable... and I can definitely tell that you're all attractive in one style or another." That last line got a myriad of reactions all across the emotional spectrum. "But the thing is, I'm not really looking for anyone else right now. I already have two wonderful girls that I intend to marry, and two more that I am closely investigating. I'm sorry... I don't like hurting anyone... but I'm content with what I have."

I looked over them all as they all made depressed sounding cries of regret.

Suddenly, one of them piped up – a young girl with green hair. "I don't care! I just want to serve under you!"

"Yeah!" cried out an ebony haired woman. "It's so hard to find a good position in the already established households!"

I blinked and looked out over all the faces once more... they all looked so hopeful.

"Let me get this straight... you all want to pledge fealty to me and be invested as my vassals? This has nothing to do with becoming engaged to me?"

There were a lot of blushes and sheepish looks at that.

“Well... You seem like a really nice guy,” said one particularly small woman with platinum hair. “There's not enough of those to go around. But if you're happy with what you have... Then I have no qualms about swearing fealty to you!”

An uproar of agreements went up at that. Bringing up the tail end of that, though, was one woman saying, “You never know, he might change his mind!”

“oooo-kayyeee,” I drawled... “I can see the attraction... Fine. I'll speak with Lady Seto, but I'm pretty sure she'll go for it. Fire up your resumes, girls. I want them in the study of my guest suite before I am instated into House Masaki.”

One by one, I set the girls loose, exchanging brief pleasantries with each one before sending them on their way. Although there were definitely a few that were memorable.

“Aren't you a little young to be declaring your fealty?” I asked a platinum-haired, purple-eyed girl that looked no older than fourteen years old.

“I'm actually forty-five,” said the girl nonchalantly as she straightened out her clothes. “Don't worry, I'm used to it. It's a genetic condition triggered by the bond to my tree. My name is Mimi Tatsuki Jurai.”

I blinked. “You're bonded?”

Mimi nodded. “To a Third-Generation Tree. But just because I have that doesn't mean anything much in the grand scheme of things. If I'm gonna get any recognition around here, I gotta bust my chops working for someone that gets noticed. Someone like you.”

I grinned at the girl. “Okay, I can definitely see that. I'll look forward to seeing your resume.”

“Sure. Just one more thing.”

“What's that?” I asked.

And without warning, Mimi jumped at me, hooking an arm over my neck, and pulling herself up to my face to give me the most surprising french kiss I have ever had at that time in my life. She then giggled at the shocked look on my face when she dropped back down to the floor.

“Just because I'm stuck with this body doesn't mean that I'm not a woman. Believe me, I've had everything looked at. I can definitely make babies. So don't ever treat me like a kid. Got it?”

“Couldn't be clearer,” I said, still giving her a look of wide-eyed surprise.

“Great!” she said as she began to walk off, her hips swinging evocatively as she did so. “See you later, Mr. Grimm.”

I blinked at that, then turned to the other girls I had yet to free. “Don't get any ideas.”

They all only giggled hysterically.

I knocked at the door to Seto's chambers in the Kamiki family branch of Tenju. I heard a stentorian voice within bid me to enter.

Opening the door, I was greeted by the sight of a large, powerfully built man bearing a set of 'friendly' mutton chops and moustache.

“Ah!” said the man as he smiled at me. “The elusive Garrick Grimm of Earth! I am Utsustumi Kamiki Jurai – Seto's husband. I'm glad to meet you at last, young man. Come in, come in, please! Seto is away for the moment, and I would like to take what little time we have alone to talk with you.”

I entered the posh looking suite. It was about the same size as Ayeka's... which made sense in a ways. While Seto was indeed highly powerful, Ayeka was very highly ranked as well. Though that would certainly change once Tenchi finally decides to ascend the throne. At that point, he'll need an entire branch of Tenju just for his wives.

Utsutsumi offered me a seat on a couch and I accepted, while he took a seat in a large armchair.

“Well, I have to admit that I was circumspect when Seto told me that she was taking an Earthman under her wing. Of course, millennia of knowing her have taught me that she certainly knows what she is doing. But somehow, you managed to surprise us all.” The older man then leaned in closer, and said in a very serious tone, “So what are your intentions here, son?”

That was a very good question, and something that I had been giving some thought to. Even so, I still had to think about it before I could answer Utsutsumi.

He was already giving me the 'I am waiting here' look by the time I spoke up.

“Well, I owe a lot to everyone here. Everyone has done so much for me... it's a phenomenal debt to be repaid, but I do intend to repay it.” I then looked Utsutsumi in the eyes. “As soon as Yuki-chan is old enough, I'll marry her and then move here to Jurai. Then I'll do whatever it takes to pay back the debt I owe.”

“And how will you pay that debt back, son?” asked Utsutsumi.

“I'll probably serve in the defense forces. I already have my tree, so having a ship is a foregone conclusion. In fact, I may already have a staff.”

“Oh?” replied Utsutsumi.

I nodded. “Those girls Seto-sama set after me? Turns out they'll settle for working under me.”

Utsutsumi burst out laughing. “You do realize that unmarried women in your employ are automatically your concubines so long as they consent?”

EPIC DOUBLE FACE-PALM! “Sweet Tsunami, you are not kidding, are you?”

“Oh dear, no,” replied Utsutsumi as he wiped tears of mirth from his eyes. “Of course, you can always say 'no' to their advances – that is your right. But so long as they are in your employ, they can insist on bearing the title of 'Concubine of Lord Garrick'.”

“Argh,” I grumbled. “But why would they do that?”

Utsutsumi shrugged. “Garrick, the Women of Jurai do as they please. They are capricious creatures given to whims that are beyond my understanding. Perhaps this is because of our ancestry as pirates – given our historical records, the behavior of our women has not changed much since those chaotic days. However, one thing that I can say for certain... once they fall in love with a man, they tend to stay in love with him no matter what happens.”

“So, I'm stuck with them.”

“For certain,” replied the older man with a smug grin.

“... I think I need a drink.”

Utsutsumi laughed as he got up and went to pour some drinks for us. By the time Seto showed up, Utsutsumi was already teaching me several very bawdy drinking songs exclusively of Juraian origin – specifically, ones about the gorgeous women of Jurai and how they are never to be crossed.

Within a few minutes of Seto showing up, we settled to business and soon enough I was duly authorized to take on my retinue. Granted, I hadn't been adopted quite yet, but I had inherited a title from Yakage and that gave me the leeway I needed to get started right away.

Fortunately, I hadn't drank very much. Just enough that I felt slightly lubricated. Even so, after dinner a quiet dinner taken with my adoptive grandparents, I was completely sobered up.

So, imagine my surprise when I went to my suite and found Yume sitting on my bed...

... completely nude.

“Close the door, Garrick. It is only us tonight.”

I frowned in puzzlement but did so regardless. “Where are the others?” I asked.

“Minagi felt it would be a good idea for Yuki and Achika to get to know each other better, so they are staying in Achika's suite tonight.”

I raised an eyebrow. “And you?”

Yume gave me a small, slightly wicked smile. “It has been forty-eight hours since Washu gave you that treatment. Tell me, handsome... how are you feeling?”

I froze where I stood and took stock of myself... and bit my lip in frustration.

“Aroused,” I admitted grudgingly. “And a bit irked.”

Yume chuckled indulgently. “Yes. It is a hard thing to ignore, isn't it? But you will live with it. It is not impossible for your kind to do so. You have the capability within you still. You, as a species, have simply forgotten how. Now, if I ask you to come here to the bed with me so I can teach you how, will you?”

I sighed as I mulled it over. Washu said Yume is a schemer, not a liar. So, even if she had every intention of doing as she said she would, there was the chance she would take advantage of me. But even so, I needed to learn to deal with this. And if that meant that I had to take a chance with Yume... Well, I suppose I have to start trusting her at some point in time.

Without a word, I went to the bed and sat down on the edge.

“Good boy,” Yume said, as in one slow, fluid movement, she reached over and caressed my face as she straddled my lap, wrapping her legs around my waist. I can't describe how it felt to smell her in the state I was in.

“Hmm,” said Yume thoughtfully. “You certainly weren't making any exaggerations in your choice of words.” I gave her a pained look but she only grinned back at me. “Don't worry. Just close your eyes and trust in me. I promise that I am not going to take advantage of you.”

I sighed deeply and nodded my head, closing my eyes as I did so.

“Good. Now, lay on your back.”

I followed her instruction and Yume shifted with me, unwrapping her legs and laying herself against my torso.

“I know what I am doing to you,” she said, her voice a seductive bedroom tone. “I am having you breathe in my essence, thus setting your blood on fire. You can feel it, can't you? Like molten metal flowing in your veins, burning with every beat of your pulse – your heart itself feels like a blast furnace in your chest, pumping fire throughout your body.

“Now... imagine yourself someplace cold. You rest upon a stone in the midst of a river. There is ice around you, save near the stone itself, for your heat has already melted it away. You must calm your fire, otherwise, even in this frozen land, it will consume you.

“So, my own... Breathe in the cold air. Breathe it in slowly, carefully. Bank your fires and let it cool the furnace in your heart. And then, once you have taken in all the cold you can, breathe out again. Slowly release the heat inside you, like steam from a boiler. Let it go, my own.”

I followed her directions, taking the deep breaths, imagining the cold air cooling my body from the inside out, and letting the heat go with each exhalation. Yume helped me by setting the cadence, gently correcting me as I went, instructing me as to exactly how I should be breathing, and all the while coloring it all so it fit in with the imagery she had provided. Eventually, though, she had no more to say. She simply let me continue the breathing exercise.

Finally, after what seemed like hours, she finally spoke.

“Open your eyes, my own.”

Slowly, my eyes opened almost of their own accord. Yume was looking down at me with a pleased expression on her face.

“Tell me now, how do you feel?”

“...Better,” I said after a moment, surprised that I actually did feel a lot better. “I feel... warm. Content. The fire is still there, but... it's like it calmed down... just hot coals and embers... How did you learn this?”

Yume smiled as she stroked my face. “It is an ancient meditative exercise taught to all young females by our shamans. We must first learn to control our own desires, lest we make a poor choice in a mate by acting prematurely. Then, we females teach the males once we are bonded, because until a male is bitten by a female he has no need of such things.

“There are other things as well, but this is the most important one – as we have the power to stir the fire within each other, we must also have the power to calm the fires lest they consume us. And trust me, there have been times where a pair lets their fires grow out of control... and they kill each other in the act of mating.

“Finally, understand this, my own. I do not teach you this lightly – it is a sacred act between mates, and it is symbolic of our bonding together. Do not speak of it with others unless they come to you in honest pursuit of truth and knowledge. To do so otherwise is to sully what I share with you.”

“I understand,” I replied. “I swear I won't ever speak lightly of this.”

“Thank you, my own,” Yume whispered as she reach up with her face and began to nibble carefully at my ear.

“What do we do now?” I asked.

Yume paused, then laughed softly. “Silly boy. We do what all males and females have done together since the beginning of time: we create our progeny.”

“Yume,” I said, gently stopping her before she could get carried away. “I understand you want children... I do too... but do you really want them now? I'll support you if you do, but...”

Yume chuckled again. “I suppose that now is a good time to tell you.

“Minagi is with child.”

I couldn't say anything. I just kept looking up at Yume's slightly smug expression – it was so weird that she was smiling like it was her own accomplishment.

“She really is?” I finally managed to say.

“Washu and I both verified it. She conceived the night before you arrived on Ryuten.” Yume then nipped my neck affectionately. “Congratulations, my own. You are going to be a father.”

“Wha... whoah...” I said helplessly. “Wait... why wouldn't she tell me first?”

“We just found out today,” murmured Yume between kisses. “And Minagi... asked me to tell you... as a show of solidarity... between us... as sister-wives.”

“But... I didn't think she would let this would happen so soon... if the wrong person finds out...”

“Don't worry,” Yume whispered in my ear. “We can slow the process. No one will be the wiser. So, now my own... you no longer have any excuse. You are already a father once. Satisfy me and make yourself a father twice.”

Being with Yume that night was an experience like none other. For one thing, it was remarkable how well our anatomy paralleled – pretty much everything important was in the right spot. Although, there were still subtle differences, and it was a learning experience for us both.

In fact, Yume was learning a lesson as she woke up the next morning.

“Oooohhh...” she moaned.

I sat up right away at the sound and gave Yume a concerned look. “You alright?”

“I think so,” she grated out. “I just wasn't expecting... so much! Is it weird to say that I'm hurting and it feels good?”

“I guess this was never covered with you when you were young,” I said with a smile. Sometimes you never learn about some things until you come across them yourself. “It's a natural thing. We got carried away last night and you're a bit bruised down there. So, in addition to all the other feel-good chemicals your glands have pumped into your system, you're also getting an extra helping of endorphins to take the edge off that pain.”

“Wonderful,” grunted Yume as she rolled her eyes. “If this keeps up between you and me, I’ll be a drug addict in no time.” She looked so adorably petulant that I carefully scooped her up and planted a kiss on her lips.

“You’ll be fine. We’ll just have to be careful... and figure out if this is something you like or hate.”

Yume grunted. “I suppose that a bit of pain is to be expected... this being my first time.”

I blinked at that. “I guess you’re right. I never really thought of you as a virgin now that you mention it... though I guess it doesn’t apply now.”

Yume gave me a smile that would not have looked out of place if she were tearing a bloody strip of meat out of a carcass. I guess she was feeling victorious.

“Well of course not. We don’t place such an emphasis on it... after all, my kind mate for life so there is no real value on virginity. Although I’m glad that you don’t really seem to care either way.”

I shrugged. “Well... in a way it’s kinda fun... You get to show the other person the... well, if you’ll pardon the pun, the in’s and out’s of sex.”

“I think I know what you mean,” she said as she slipped carefully out of my lap and onto the floor. “The look on your face when my entrapment organ snared you was priceless.”

I sighed at that. “I should have realized you’d be equipped with something like that when you mentioned you don’t ovulate until *after* the act.” I have to admit, when it happened images of vagina dentata flashed through my head for a brief moment.

Yume grimaced as she performed some stretches, undoubtedly having a few kinked core-muscles.

“Well, at any rate I’ll be surprised if it doesn’t take.” She then flashed me a more genuine smile. “Looking forward to it, papa?”

I smiled at the thought. Children! You honestly have no idea how much I have wanted my own. Teaching, playing, and roughhousing, helping them to help themselves, and making sure they grow to become forces of awesome.

“I can hardly wait,” I replied as I pulled Yume into a hug. “This family is going to have some absolutely epic kids, isn’t it?”

Yume chuckled. “That’s exactly why I wanted to join your family, Garrick.” She then pulled me down and gave me a slow, sensuous kiss.

“So, what now?” I asked after our lips parted.

“Well,” said Yume in that bedroom voice of hers, “I am going to find that communal bath and have myself a nice, long soak. You are gonna go find Minagi and tell her what a wonderful person she is for bearing your child and worship the ground she walks on like a male ought to.”

I chuckled at the thought. “Yes ma’am!”

I made myself presentable and found my way down to the dining hall to enjoy breakfast with everyone else... and was promptly tackled by Yuki. It was really impressive, too, since she hit me hard enough to make me slide a good ten feet backwards on the polished floor. Everyone else laughed and a few even cheered Yuki on.

“... Miss me much, tiny love?” I asked once my diaphragm started working again. My body may be reinforced, but a muscle spasm is a muscle spasm. She was definitely getting stronger now that she was bonded to Bizen. Thank Tsunami she didn’t get all the super-strength at once!

“Unh,” Yuki replied as she kissed my cheek. “You smell like Yume,” she whispered in my ear. “That’s okay, though. You two smell good together.”

I blinked at that. Did she just imply that she wanted to try being with both Yume and I together!?

“Yuki, restraint,” I warned her quietly.

Like a spring-loaded marionette, Yuki snapped upright to the side of me, wearing a slightly nervous grin.

“It's so nice to see you doing so well this morning, Gar-kun!” she chirped. It was laying it on a little thick, but I wasn't gonna call her out on it.

“Same here, tiny love,” I said as I picked myself up. “Let's get something to eat.”

Breakfast was a rousing affair. Pretty much everyone was present, except for Yume and Seto. Minagi positively radiated and gave me meaningful smiles, and I'm certain that I did in return. Funaho and Misaki would catch us at it, and then smile at each other as well, but otherwise said nothing about it. To put the play on words, mum was the word on the matter.

Set against this backdrop, we all talked, traded jibes, and laughed about it all.

More than once, I had to quietly explain a particularly odd relationship to the Emperor, especially that of Ayeka and Ryoko. Fortunately, he took it all with good cheer, and why wouldn't he? He finally had someone that explained these complex interpersonal dynamics in plain talk.

Finally, though, the table was cleared by the serving staff and an air of business-like attitude settled over the table.

“Well, now that we're all fed,” said Funaho with a professional smile in place, “we need to speak about what will be happening over the next few days. Now, normally we give ourselves more time for these sorts of affairs, but unfortunately you all have your lives back on Earth that you need to return to.

“That said, Garrick, as you know your bonding ceremony is tomorrow, however that is only a small part of tomorrow's activities. First of all, as a matter of procedure, your tree will need to be relocated into the Royal Nursery early tomorrow morning. Washu assures me that she can facilitate proper access to your subspace residence so our arborists can do their jobs, but I felt better in getting your permission. Is this fine with you, son?”

“Perfectly fine, Mother,” I replied, smiling.

“Very well then. Additionally, Yuki will be reenacting her bonding ceremony. While having Ayeka and I witness was good enough for provisional acceptance, four members of the Royal Household are needed for full acceptance into the Family. Recent events have garnered enough interest that even with the short notice, having enough attendees will not be a problem.

“Once the matter of bonding is settled, both of your trees will be transplanted into Central Units and you and Yuki will have the rest of the day to yourselves so you can make sure your trees are properly synchronized to their respective units.

“That brings us to the second day of festivities. We will hold your formal introduction to the rest of the Royal Houses. With the bonding you will be formally adopted into House Masaki and you will be henceforth known to Jurai as Garrick Masaki Jurai and Yuki Masaki Jurai.” At this, Funaho's smile became knowing. “I understand that there are members of House Amake that are still sore over certain events in the past. They will undoubtedly attempt to slander you or provoke you into a fight. Do try to keep a cool head, my son.”

At this, the Emperor himself spoke up. “That would go for all of you. As you are all considered close friends or family of Garrick, all of you will be esteemed guests of the Court. Do not rise to anyone's bait. Seto, Misaki, and Funaho will be making the rounds and defusing situations that become untenable.”

Funaho nodded a brief bow to her husband, and then went on while directing an intense look at me.

“Finally, my son, there is the question of your engagements. I know that there are several women you intend to marry and it would be best to settle their status before you leave. The day after your introductions, I would like us to hold your engagement ceremonies. However, for this to go over well with the rest of the Royal Household, you must choose a woman of Royal Blood to be engaged to as your First Wife.

“You need not make your decision now. In fact, I urge you to spend as much time as possible with Tenyo and Achika... and maybe even Minaho as well if you can manage her ire.” With that, Funaho cast a critical look over at Minaho, who fumed at being put on the spot once more by her grandmother. “I understand that you prefer Achika at this time, but even so, take some time, son, to make sure this is a sound decision.”

I nodded to Funaho humbly. “I shall do as you ask of me, mother.”

“Wonderful,” Funaho replied with a glowing smile. “As for all of you, you have been perfect guests thus far. You are at liberty until tomorrow morning, though we would appreciate it if you would all join us for the evening meal at sunset. Now, if you will excuse us, Misaki, my husband, and I all have business to attend to.”

The three in question stood, but before leaving they all lined up by me as I stood as well. Funaho gave me a loving hug, and then whispered in my ear.

“Congratulations, my son.” She then gave me a mischievous grin as Misaki took her place and we gave each other back-popping hugs.

“Let me know when the shower is,” she whispered in my ear.

I blinked at that, but I didn't have time to ask because I was then approached by the Emperor, who motioned me closer and closer until we were well within each others personal space.

He then leaned over and whispered in my ear, “Later I wish to spend some time with you so I may get to know you. Also, do not think that I do not know how to read my wives, son. We will do what we can to keep things quiet... but for now I recommend you spend some time with Minagi.”

I blinked and gave Azusa a surprised look.

“Thank you, father,” I said quietly.

“Oh, don't thank me yet,” Azusa replied with a grin. “Come the day you're able to leave Earth aside, I will put you to work, son.”

With that, the Emperor and his wives took their leave and a small but strong hand grabbed a hold of mine and began to drag me.

“C'mon,” said Washu's voice cheerfully. “We got a lot to talk about!”

Minagi followed us and soon enough we were alone together in an unoccupied suite. Washu pulled a yellow orb from her pocket and then set it on a coffee table.

“Okay! We should be safe from eavesdroppers now. I take it Yume told you the good news?”

I looked to Minagi and then swept her off her feet, spinning us around in merry, dizzying circles as we both whooped joyfully.

“I'll take that as a 'yes',” said Washu dryly with a wry grin on her face.

“How do you feel, mom?” I asked Minagi as I set her back on her feet.

“Like I can take on every single pirate guild out there with one hand tied behind my back!” Minagi cried out jubilantly. “Oh, I know it's only been a few days but I already feel so wonderful! Like the whole universe is full of so much hope and promise!”

I laughed happily at her sentiment. “Of course it is! And all that promise is bundled up right here.” I placed my hand gently above her pelvis, where her womb would be. Minagi looked down, smiling as she used her own hands to frame mine over her stomach.

“I wonder when I'll begin to feel it?” she asked.

"It'll be a while," chimed in Washu. "So, how much do you want to know?"

I looked to Minagi in askance and she nodded her head.

I then turned to Washu. "Boy or girl?"

"Girl," replied the super-genius with a smile.

"My first daughter," I said softly to myself. The idea of having a daughter has always had a special place in my heart. Not that I didn't want boys. Boys learn readily enough by the example you set, and they certainly did need the affection and warmth of their fathers... but girls take a special effort. Girls need what the boys get, only even more so. Their hearts are delicate. Even if they can be made stronger and tempered, they needed a father's love to do it properly.

"Hair and eyes?" I asked.

"You guys are gonna love this," said Washu with a grin. "Dark-blue hair and emerald-green eyes – a perfect mix between you two!"

"She'll be beautiful!" Minagi whispered. "Oh, Garrick! Should we decide on a name now?"

"We can go ahead and start making a list of possibilities," I said as I thought about it for a moment, dredging through my relatively recent mastery of the Japanese language to find something suitable. "What about Hikari to start off with?"

"Sunlight?" said Minagi to herself, mulling it over as she undoubtedly accessed Hinase's database. "Glimmering, glittering, sunbeams... It's perfect!" She looked down to her belly once more, framing the small spot above her pelvis with gentle and loving fingers. "She will be my treasured light... my Hikari-chan."

I laughed. "I didn't expect you to run with the first thing I thought of."

Minagi smiled at me, then pulled me into a fierce hug. "Don't be so surprised, Garrick. I'm not."

"Well anyhow," I said a bit sheepishly. "How did you know so soon?"

Minagi smiled. "It's the medical software upgrade Mother provided me with. It detected a shift in my hormones that indicated that I had just become pregnant. I went to Mother right away and she brought in Yume for a second opinion just to be sure."

I turned to the magenta-haired genius. "Thanks for the help, Washu-chan. Now the most immediate question is gonna be how we'll handle this."

"Oh? What do you mean?" asked Minagi.

"Well, me being unmarried and yet having gotten you pregnant will undoubtedly raise a ruckus amongst the rest of the Royal Family... Especially the Amake – they seem to have an ax to grind with the Masaki."

Minagi put her hands over her mouth in shock. "Oh dear, I never thought of that!"

I gave Minagi a wry smile. "Well, not like we can take it back now. Besides, I went along with it in the first place, so I carry as much blame as you. Washu-chan, Yume said we may be able to slow the growth of the fetus. What're your thoughts?"

Washu hummed thoughtfully. "We could do that. Another option is to remove the fetus temporarily and keep it in stasis until it's safe for us to reveal Minagi's pregnancy. As you probably know, Airi did this when she discovered she was pregnant with Minaho."

I nodded at that. "We can hold off on the more invasive option until we know what sort of time frame we're looking at. How do you feel, Minagi?"

"I'm fine with that," said Minagi, beaming. "As long as our Hikari can come into the world at some point, then I'll be happy."

I snorted. "You know, in addition to the most loving and epic parents ever, we're also probably going to be the most efficient parents ever as well."

"Why's that?" asked Minagi.

Washu chuckled. "Because, Minagi, it usually takes other parents several months at least to work through everything you two just did two minutes."

Minagi blushed at that. "Well... I really do like the sound of 'Hikari'... And I just want things to go smoothly."

I smiled and gave Minagi a hug and a kiss. "I understand, Minagi... just don't feel like you need to do everything I say just to make things go smooth. I value your opinion."

"I know," Minagi sighed as she squeezed me back. "And I love you for caring so much about me."

Washu sighed. "As happy as I am to see you two like this, I should probably let you be now. You know, so you two can show each other exactly how much you love each other." Washu's smile then became impish. "I'll just pick this privacy device up later."

Minagi and I spent the rest of the morning together in that suite, cuddling, making out, making love, and talking about things to come in general. One thing we decided on fairly quickly was that we would set no undue expectations on our little girl – our only real concern was that she was happy. Although, I did admit that I hoped that Hikari would go out of her way to become an exceptional force of awesome.

Minagi, in return, confided that with someone like me for a father, Hikari would make being awesome look effortless.

As much as I hated to do so, though, I had to go and do things.

"Don't go yet," said Minagi fretfully as she grabbed my hand. "Please... stay just a little longer?"

I sighed and I pulled her into a hug. "I want to stay as well, love. But I made some promises and I need to keep them. And I don't want to break my word."

Minagi looked downcast. "Is your word more important than staying here with me?"

That caught me off guard. I never expected Minagi, of all people, to come at me with something like that.

"Minagi, my word is very important. If I treat it so lightly with people like the Emperor, then how do you think I would wind up treating it with our children?"

Minagi gave me a surprised look. "But you'd never do that!"

"And I never will. So you must understand that I have no intention to start with a very powerful man who is willing to call me his son."

Minagi sighed. "I understand. I just wish you didn't have to go."

I gave Minagi another hug. "I know. If it helps, I don't want to go either."

"I know," sighed Minagi.

I thought for a moment about how I could make this easier on her. "Does Yuki know yet?"

Minagi pulled away from me with a mildly surprised expression on her face. "No, we never told her. Do you think that's safe?"

"The Emperor and the Queens know. And the only person I can see her telling is Sasami... and then Sasami will tell her sister... and Ayeka would know the importance of keeping this under wraps."

Minagi nodded. "Okay then. I'll tell Yuki all about it." She then smiled. "She's going to love this, isn't she?"

I smiled back at Minagi. "She always said she wanted a big family."

She nodded once more in agreement. "As long as I'm around, Yuki will never be lonely again."

After I left, I was soon found by a messenger and brought to the Emperor's Chambers off the Throne Room where he was having his midday tea.

“Ah, Garrick,” said Emperor Azusa pleasantly. “Come in and have a seat.”

I did as asked and a young girl in servant's robes brought out a tea cup and poured the tea for me, leaving it on the coffee table in front of me.

“Thank you,” I said politely to the girl, who blushed.

Azusa smiled mildly. “You may leave us, Annette.” Without protest, the servant girl bowed and left.

“You've caused quite a ruckus the other day,” said Azusa once he was sure we were alone.

“Many of the available young women going after you, regardless of boundaries or decorum. I was surprised they even went as far as breaking into the throne room during a private court.”

“I hope that I didn't upset anyone too badly,” I said as I tried the tea. I have no idea what it was, but it was vaguely sweet and tart.

“Just some of their parents,” Azusa said with a smile. “Really, they were more embarrassed by the actions of their daughters than anything else. I hope that you don't mind, but I had their resumes sent to my desk so I can review them myself before we went over them together. No offense, my son, but you are new at this.”

I blinked at that, then nodded amiably. “Thank you, really. I'm glad to have help from someone with experience in these matters.”

Azusa smiled as he pulled out a thick portfolio. “Honestly, you're rather fortunate. These days there's no shortage of competent staffers available. The higher nobility have taken on what they can so these people don't have to resort to menial livings to get by, but even so there are only so many they can comfortably afford.

“So, before we talk about who you bring into your retinue, let's talk about how much you can actually afford.”

The first thing we dove into was my land holdings left by Yakage. Surprise surprise, I had the planet Abason, home of the infamous Doudos.

Abason is a rugged, rocky, geologically young world not unlike Earth in the early Cretaceous period. Abason was two-thirds covered in water, but really had far less volume in water than Earth. The difference was that Abason's water was composed of a myriad of oceanic and freshwater lakes. Not many of them were much larger than Lake Superior or Lake Baikal. Even so, the steady volcanic activity and profusion of water made sure that Abason, despite being on the outer edge of its primary's 'Goldilocks Zone', is a verdant rainforest planet.

Abason has always been a place for tourists. Few people actually live there, and the main reason is the doudo. Initially, Abason had a colonization period where people enchanted with the idea of an isolated forest world flocked. They could hardly care less about the doudo, they simply killed them where they showed up.

But then, the Galaxy Alliance stepped in, labeling the doudo as an endangered species. Caught between the vicious woodland giant and the Galaxy Alliance, many of the colonists left. A few remained, maintaining small homesteads or even some tourist resorts. A few even facilitated poaching of the doudo for their luxurious pelts and they persist as a thorn in the sides of the Juraians and the Galaxy Alliance.

Regardless, there was some revenue generated by the taxes on Abason, which all went to Yakage's account. Once all the upkeep was handled and the tithe to the Empire paid, it still left me with a substantial income. That, plus the stipend I would receive as being the Emperor's son, left me with a good cash flow to draw from.

Next came the resumes. All of the girls were qualified as bodyguards, having been trained under Misaki's school for bodyguards. The few that were bonded to trees, all of them Third

Generation, were trained in the Imperial Navy. I would learn more about how that worked later once I underwent my own Naval indoctrination, but it sounded like they were part of some reservist unit.

There were a good number of girls trained in various other fields – gardeners, culinary artists, nannies, musicians, armorers, maintenance technicians, and even engineers and artisans. It really was a mixed bag, and I had enough income to have them all as a part of my household.

Azusa gave me a knowing smile. “It seems you will have to build yourself a manor house when you get home, son.”

“Probably more like a housing complex. Though I may be able to get away with using my C-Space... but then it will raise some eyebrows for the townspeople to see that many strangers coming and going from Tenchi's house.” I sighed. “It doesn't matter how you slice it, it's still bologna.”

“Perhaps you can have them stay on your ship then,” suggested the Emperor. “Once your tree is fitted to a central unit, you'll have all the space you need for your retinue. That should give you the leeway you need to arrange for their housing on Earth without arousing too much suspicion.”

“I guess that will work,” I said. “Really, it'll cause a bit of trouble for there to be so many people moving into the area at once, but I guess it can't be helped. I'll still have to come up with something to put the mundanes at ease... maybe I can just say I'm starting my own business and the new people are my workers.”

“That would probably work,” Azusa replied with a nod of his head. “The locals will probably appreciate the business you'll be bringing them.”

“The only concern that leaves me is going to be how they'll deal with the fact that I'm fathering children from different women. Culturally speaking, in Japan it is fine to have a 'pillow woman' in addition to your wife so long as her services are paid for. But children are another matter altogether. If you're not married, then the bond between father and child is not recognized. So the locals might think it strange that I associate so closely with not just the children of my First Wife, but all the others as well. And I don't want people to bully my children.”

“I understand how you feel,” the Emperor said heavily. “I myself worry a great deal over my daughters. Yoshō, I at least know he can care for himself. But Ayeka and Sasami... they can be terribly naïve at times. Sometimes I worry that maybe I have not done enough as a father.”

I smiled a bit. Sometimes it's easy to forget that this imposing figure of a man is a father who is very much smitten with his daughters.

I shrugged. “Honestly, I think you've done alright. I mean, sure, you've been a little distant but that just comes with the territory. You're certainly not as bad as my step-father. He was a smart man alright, and every bit the self-made man at that... but when it came to interpersonal relationships he had no idea what he was doing. I just didn't notice until I was about sixteen and realized that looking him in the face whenever he lectured me, just like he would always demand of me, only pissed him off even more. I got thrown into more than one wall just for that.”

Azusa gave me an astonished look. “How can you miss anything like that?”

“I don't,” I replied flatly. “It made me stronger by breaking my heart, but that doesn't mean I miss it one bit. The only things I do miss are the love of my birth-mother and the humor of my siblings. And those I'd already lost before coming here, regardless – it just made it that much more complete.”

“And what of your children-to-come?”

“I'll never be my step-father, that's for certain. All I ever want is to love my own and to be able to teach them how to avoid getting hurt by making bad choices. I know they'll make a few. I certainly did... but unlike me, they'll have someone understanding to turn to. Of course, they'll still have to face the consequences, but I'm not going to beat them up for it... emotionally or otherwise.”

“Really though... there is one man I really want to be like with regards to raising children. That would be my mother's maternal grandfather. He was a sweet and loving person. So much that his children knew the moment they crossed the line with him. All he would need to do was give them this look of disappointment... and they knew they'd let him down.

“I never really got the chance to know him, but he left a mark on me. My first scar – here on my left ear. It was an accident, of course. Before it happened, we had a long-standing family tradition that he gave all the boys their first haircuts when they turned one year old. The poor old man wept inconsolably when his scissors slipped and cut my ear. He never cut anyone's hair after that and he passed away about a year later.”

The Emperor rose and I felt his hand rest heavily and comfortingly on my shoulder. “If this is how you feel about having children of your own, then I believe I could not ask a better man to be my son.”

I looked up to Azusa and saw he was smiling down at me. “Thank you... father.”

The Emperor, that is my adoptive father, and I traded some anecdotes afterward, then bade each other farewell until dinnertime. Azusa had much work to do and it would not wait – such was the necessary evils of his position. I can't say that I envied him much and vowed to try and make as little work for him in the future as possible.

Of course, at times that would be unavoidable, but it's the thought that counts.

I felt like seeing what Yume was up to, so on a hunch I went to the family baths. I was not disappointed.

“You're still in the bath, Crazy Eyes?” I teased gently.

Yume chuckled from where she lounged in the steaming water. “Oh, don't be so surprised, Handsome. You did this to me, after all.”

I snorted as I went to start scrubbing down. “Yeah, and who made me do it?”

“Takes two to tango, Handsome. Regardless... This is actually my second soak of the day. Since you've been so kind to help me purge the mating drive out of my system, I've been spending my time meditating on my future. I'm going to be very lethargic for the next few months... and very hungry, too. Whether new life takes root in my womb or not, I will still begin my physical maturation. I will be craving meat and other high-protein food. And nothing too lean. But you shouldn't have to worry too much. I have already sent Hishima and Takashima out to procure fresh meat for the kitchens.”

I nodded at that as I rinsed off. “Okay then. What about fruits and vegetables?”

“Anything that is healthy for you will be healthy for me and our child. In fact, I would prefer if you provided that.”

As I entered the bath proper, I nodded. “Good thing we have plenty of arable land back home. I guess I should see if I can plant some pecan trees.”

“Pecan?” asked Yume as I settled next to her, letting her lean into me. As her scent hit me, it felt strangely comforting – it was not like the urge to have sex with her at all. Instead, I was filled with a sense of calm and contentment.

I smiled. “A favorite nut from my home land. Thin shell, easy to crack, and the meat of the nut is buttery-sweet. I loved cracking them open in my mouth when I was a kid. The earthy-woody taste of the shell was like a challenge to get at the treat inside.

“The trees themselves grow tall and provide nuts for as long as three hundred years. And the cuttings from pruning are great for cooking fires – the smoke from the wood imparts a very rich and satisfying flavor.”

Yume laughed. “Sounds like we got ourselves a carnivore here.”

I shrugged. "I definitely like my meat. There's a certain cut of meat back home we call brisket. You cook it real slow and if you do it right it comes out so tender and juicy that it practically melts in your mouth. My grandfather made a killer barbecue brisket. He'd marinate it for four nights in his own special sauce, and then slow cook it in a brick pit for another four nights. That stuff was a carnivore's delight."

Yume grinned. "Well then, I'm glad I chose a male that appreciates the value of well prepared meat." Her gaze became more sober. "Fair warning, Handsome: I'm going to be very irritable while I undergo this maturation. I will probably gain ten-to-twenty centimeters in height and pack on between ten-to-fifteen kilograms of mass – more if I do become pregnant – and all within six months. There are going to be a lot of growing pains involved."

"I see. How would you like to be treated?"

"A little pampering here and there would be nice. For the most part a calm environment is best."

I nodded at that. "Understandable. Once I have everything with Katherine and the Central Unit in order, that shouldn't be a problem. Plenty of space for you to have your own sanctuary."

Yume sighed. "Thank you. That was one of the things I was looking forward to – a nice pocket of subspace with a garden the size of a continent."

"Well, don't forget that you gotta share it with others. And speaking of which..." I motioned to the entrance where a group of figures was entering the baths. I smiled as they quickly resolved.

Minagi, with Yuki, Sasami, and Achika. Tennyo and Minaho were there as well, and they were followed by two others. One was Mimi Tatsuki Jurai.

The other was one of the other more notable girls that had pursued me: Anya Amake.

Anya might have been mistaken for a Russian girl on Earth with her long, slight, elfin build, silver hair, and hazel eyes. She was actually Mimi's cousin, and really just a few years younger than Mimi. The two regarded each other like sisters, and Anya truly hated how some of her family had a political agenda against just about everyone else. She had said that she'd consider it a blessing to get married and no longer have to bear the Amake name.

I raised an eyebrow at the collection of girls.

"I thought I was done running from gaggles of girls," I called out teasingly.

"Silly," said Yuki as she stuck her tongue out at me and gave me a red-eye, albeit with a smile. "You won't ever get rid of us, Gar-kun. We all love you too much!"

"Speak for yourself," said Minaho dryly.

Yuki looked to Sasami and the two grinned wickedly at each other.

"Hoo boy," I sighed.

"This oughta be good," Yume said.

And just like that, Yuki's hand darted out and pulled away Minaho's towel, catching the woman completely off guard. Minaho cried out in shock as she immediately took off after Yuki, but Yuki had her own ideas about that.

"Wow! Look at her, Gar-kun! Minaho-chan has such a pretty body!"

Without a word, Minaho froze into place as though she had suddenly turned to stone. Slowly, she turned to face me. And I honestly had to admit, the view was impressive. Minaho had a beautifully formed body with a generous bust that was not too big for her frame, and pleasant curves through her waist, hips, and thighs that gave her a perfect hourglass figure.

I also saw the scar I gave her – a neat and faint line like I had requested that paralleled her ribs. As I had thought, it did not detract from her beauty one bit.

Yuki suddenly came up behind me and dropped Minaho's towel on my head, catching me off guard.

“If you want your towel back, you gotta come here and let Gar-kun tell you how pretty you are!” taunted Yuki.

Suddenly, tears welled up in Minaho's eyes and she began to wail.

I shot a look at Yuki, who blushed under the unspoken criticism. “Ah... oops?” she said.

I groaned and got up, went to Minaho, and gently wrapped the towel around her. Everyone else simply looked on in wide-eyed amazement.

“I thought the universe hated you!” she cried out mournfully. “Why does everything seem to go in your favor!?”

I felt it was best not to answer that question. Because really, dealing with a crying woman was bad enough. It'd be stupid to upset her even more by pointing out that the universe was using her to make me miserable.

Instead, I gently guided her over to the washing area. “Mimi? Anya?” I called.

The two girls all but teleported. “Yes Lord Grimm?” they said in unison.

I blinked at that before going on. “Would you two kindly help Minaho here?” I asked. “Just please be gentle with her.”

The two smiled warmly. “Of course we will,” answered Anya.

That done, all the other girls began to wash up, mindless of my own presence. I didn't really try to look... well, maybe a little. These were all very lovely women to look at, and I'm rather peculiar amongst men in that I have no particular favorite piece of anatomy. While I can appreciate individual parts of a woman, I prefer to look at the woman as a whole. Rather like preferring to listen to the the entire symphony rather than appreciating the part of a single instrument.

“A little distracted?” teased Yume as I settled into the bathwater next to her.

“Kinda hard not to be,” I replied, a bit grumpy at being called out.

Yume snickered. “You know, this is going to be more fun than I thought it would be.”

I gave Yume a suspicious look. “How so?”

Yume grinned back at me. “Just that this is starting to feel more and more like home. You know, with all these females around.” She then chuckled. “It's actually quite interesting. Juraian men typically sire far fewer sons than any other males in the known universe. So Jurai has a rather high gender imbalance in favor of females – the ratio is almost three-to-one. Probably why polygyny is favored here.”

“And you *really* have no problems with that?” I asked.

“No,” Yume answered. “Even before I left my home I felt that my standards were high enough that I may have had to share the lucky male with my sisters. That was a long time ago, though. Although I haven't had a family for quite some time, I find myself warming to the idea once more. Especially when the entire pack is shaping up to be so exceptional.”

“Hey Yume!” cried out Yuki as she came wading over with Sasami in tow. “Let's go over there! We gotta talk!”

“Try not to be too graphic with those two,” I groaned quietly as Yume got up. Yume only chuckled merrily as she winked back at me.

I sighed and was suddenly embraced from behind.

“Hello, Minagi-chan,” I said with a smile.

“How'd you guess?” she asked.

“You're about my height.” Very true, given she's about an inch taller than me. I then gave Minagi a sly look over my shoulder. “Besides, I should know by now how your body feels against mine.”

Minagi chuckled. “Of course.” She then sighed as she settled in at my side. “I'm so happy, Garrick. Sometimes I worry this is some kind of dream.”

“I don't,” I replied lightly.

“Oh? Why's that?”

In reply, I motioned over to the group comprised of Yume, Yuki, and Sasami. Mimi and Anya had just joined them, and apparently they were having a discussion about breasts. I could tell because Yuki suddenly groped Mimi from behind, giving the much older woman a good feel-up, and then shook her head in disappointment. I didn't catch what was said, but Mimi sure looked pissed.

“Sure, you can make shit like that up,” I said philosophically, “but you know you're not dreaming if you ever see it in action.”

Minagi barked a laugh, just as Achika came over and settled in on my other side.

“Hey, what's so funny?” asked Achika curiously.

“Yuki's embracing her bisexuality,” I said with a grin. “Unfortunately, not everyone got that memo.”

Achika looked at the proceedings and giggled – you could see the actual moment that Mimi realized that Yuki found her to be attractive, lesser bust be damned. I swear the air around Mimi darkened for a moment as she was overtaken by a spasm of horror.

“Poor Mimi,” sighed Achika. “She never can catch a break.”

“She has my sympathies,” I intoned. “I can tell already that Yuki is gonna be a force to be reckoned with around here.”

Achika nodded. “She kinda reminds me of the stories I've heard about Grandmother Seto when she first showed up. I've been told that once she got over her initial depression, no one in Tenju was safe from her predations. It didn't matter if you had a penis or a vagina. Whether or not it was all an elaborate joke on her part is still up in the air – she still hits on the younger girls now and then. Especially if it throws them off their game.”

I shook my head but smiled nonetheless. “Grandmother is one scary woman sometimes. I wouldn't have her any other way, though. Keeps things interesting around here.”

Achika laughed. “And this isn't?”

I scoffed. “This is the next generation of rabble-rousers. After we take over I think Grandmother will finally hang up her devil horns and just sit back and enjoy the show.”

“I'll put money against that,” Achika snarked. “Anyhow... Oi, Minagi! Whose turn is it with Gar-kun tonight?”

I blinked at that. They were orchestrating this shit?

“I believe it's your turn, Achika,” Minagi replied lazily.

“Sure you don't wanna stick around?” Achika asked coyly.

Minagi chuckled as she saw me goggle at that. “Nah. We can always do that later. It'll be your first time together, so it's special. No need for the rest of us to interfere. Besides, you know what you're doing.”

I blinked again before I asked, “You girls have been planning all this all along?”

“Yup!” replied Achika brightly. “It was Yuki's idea. In fact, if I recall she's supposed to get you to herself after me.”

At my worried expression, Minagi and Achika both laughed.

“Don't worry, Gar-kun,” said Minagi. “She promised she'd behave herself. She just wants a bit of quality time with you.”

I sighed at that. It would be all kinds of awkward if Yuki tried to seduce me in bed. Bad enough she was already acting out towards other girls, but at least that was culturally acceptable for her. Freaking Japan and it's ridiculous age of consent!

“Anyhow,” said Achika, trying to drag the conversation back on track, “we've even scheduled a night for you to spend with Tennyo and Minaho.”

“Are they aware of this?” I asked.

“They are,” Minagi confirmed for me. “And before you ask, no, Minaho isn't really looking forward to this, but she's decided that she'll go through with it just to resolve once and for all that there's nothing between you two.”

I scoffed at that. If there was anyone in this group that was a clear-cut tsundere, it would be Minaho. And from the knowing smiles on Achika's and Minagi's faces, they agreed silently with me.

“And Tennyo?” I asked.

“She's pretty sure it's only physical,” Achika replied with a grin. “That said, she wants to get it out of her system.”

I blinked at that. “I thought she was supposed to be a 'proper lady'.”

“You're thinking of Minaho. Tennyo's the sneaky one.”

“Sweet Tsunami,” I muttered, causing the two women to giggle. “And you?” I asked Achika pointedly.

“After about two decades of being a proper little Japanese girl, I decided that I just don't give a fuck anymore... metaphorically speaking, that is. Honestly, I love to fuck whenever I can.”

“Amen!” replied Minagi and the two exchanged a fist-bump.

I gave Achika a measuring look.

“What?” she asked.

“I just want to make sure... you don't have any children of your own, do you?”

Achika went bright red and began to splutter, while Minagi exploded into raucous laughter.

All things considered, the bath with everyone was just what I needed to put me at ease and sort out my feelings and the feelings of my ladies.

Minagi and Yuki I already understood. Minagi was prepared to do everything and anything for me... even if it was difficult for her, at times, to let me go. She really meant it when she came back to Earth that she did not ever want to leave me again. Such selfless devotion resonates with me profoundly. It is a beautiful thing and I love Minagi deeply for it. Her devotion will always be rewarded with my love.

Yuki... was her own woman now. Despite her age, she had matured to a remarkable degree. She still had a long ways to go, but the Japanese predilection to instill self-sufficiency early on combined with recent events has made her into a person who can certainly make her own choices.

And, Goddess help me, I loved her more every day. It wasn't so much the big things, though. Those were important, yes, but they weren't what I was really in love with. It was how she played and teased and cajoled. It was how she glared at a problem on paper, as though it had personally insulted her, as she tried to resolve it. It was how she smiled when she pushed her physical limits, smiling despite how her body screamed in protest. I had realized that, when she was ready for it and bore our first child, she will wear that same smile despite the labor pains... because she would want her first child to come into the world knowing her smile.

That was why I loved her.

Yume was still a bit of a conundrum for me. I understood why it was she wanted me, and why I was attracted to her. It was mostly physical and sociological... but the seeds were there. I already appreciated her dry humor, terrible as it was sometimes. But then, I was raised by terrible people.

Even so, this was something I did not want to squander. I decided that I would strive to nurture the growing love and respect we had for each other. With love, care, and maybe just a bit of luck, our feelings for each other will grow into something healthy and beautiful... even if it had something of a tart flavor to get used to.

Achika was... interesting. Raised to be a proper Japanese girl and gone rebel. Chafing under the unvoiced expectation that someday she would have to act like a 'proper' princess of Jurai. One thing she certainly had was the burning passion I so adored in Ayeka. I could always see the fire burning in her eyes, even if only banked to smoldering embers. It always gave me a thrill deep inside whenever I saw any of the Juraian women hit me with that look – that deeply seated ferocity that was the birthright of these women born of pirates.

I don't know why I found that so fascinating. Maybe it was because I am, in my heart, a pyromaniac. For me, there are few things more fascinating than seeing a fire dance and writhe. The only thing that really kept that in check was how horribly destructive it can be... but when given the chance, I will always be lost in the gentle flicker of a candle light as it slowly consumed it's fuel in a brilliant display of ferocity.

Tennyo I was uncertain about. I did find her playful, sneaky nature to be amusing, and she also knew when to cut the crap and just be honest when it counted. That was something rather refreshing.

Minaho... I had no idea. She could very well be attracted to me and was fighting it tooth and nail. If this was the case, then I definitely wanted to help her make peace with herself, no matter whether or not I win her heart in the process. Minaho was a worthwhile person – a capable manager and a stunning beauty.

As for the others like Mimi and Anya... They all definitely had their good points. I could see all of them being loving wives and mothers. But the problem was that beyond adding one or two more women to my list of prospective brides, I worried whether or not there was enough of 'me' to go around. Let's face it – there's only one Garrick Grimm. It was going to be bad enough dividing my time between five or six wives and the children they'll bear for me. But the other thirty-four women that all wanted a piece of the action? I honestly hated to disappoint them, but I could only have them as my retinue and nothing more. Not unless everyone got *really* comfortable with the idea of sharing, and I seriously did not want to put anyone through that emotional wringer.

“Credit for your thoughts?” asked Achika as she and I made our way to my suite.

“Eh?” I said as I looked her way.

“You've been preoccupied ever since we left the baths and all through dinner,” she said, her tone teasing the but words themselves were dead serious. “What's going through that head of yours that's so damn important?”

“Sorry Achika,” I said, a bit embarrassed. “I've just been trying to sort out this whole situation.”

“Which one?” she pressed.

“The one in which I have to figure out how I'm gonna make sure all of my beloved ladies get all the love and attention they need from me.”

Achika grinned. “Is that all? Didn't we tell you already that we're working it out between ourselves?”

“You did,” I allowed. “But I was left out of the loop. You see, I don't mind if you work things out yourselves, but I still want to be part of the process, because I want to see for myself that everyone is getting their say on things. Besides, this directly involves me. For that alone I should get a say. Lastly, I thought I was supposed to have the final say in how we did things.”

Achika blushed. “Well... Minagi did say something like that... but the rest of us felt that with as busy as you've been lately, it'd be a good idea to not bother you with it.”

“Well, from now on just make sure to include me on these matters.” I sighed heavily. “I got blindsided by the whole concubine thing. While I at least have the right to decline, there's still going to be some of those girls that will ask me to marry them. And I suspect that there's going to be at least

one or two that you and the others are going to shove onto me. I just want to make sure that my feelings and the reasons for them are known, even if I'm having trouble putting them into words."

With that said, we entered my suite and the moment the door closed, Achika enveloped me in a firm embrace.

"I guess that's what I like about you, Gar-kun," Achika whispered into my ear. "You are not at all like these other men of Jurai. You will stand up to us women and make your thoughts and feelings known where others will meekly accept what we say as law." Before I could say anything, she sealed my lips with her own.

As we kissed, she gently pushed me towards the bed, subtly relieving herself of her robes as she went so was fully nude by the time we got there.

Finally, Achika pulled away... or to be more accurate, she forced me down onto the bed, separating our lips in the process.

"Since the others want our first night together to be special," she said in a soft, bedroom voice, "I am giving my body completely to you tonight. You may do to me whatever you please."

"A little trusting for our first time together, aren't we?" I asked her coyly.

Achika only smiled back. "I have it on very good authority that you know what you're doing."

I grinned back up at her. "In that case, lay down on your stomach. If I'm going to do this then I need to do it right."

Achika never knew what was coming. Sensual massage, tender kisses all over her body, foreplay that she'd only ever read about. I used all kinds of dirty little tricks. A blindfold to enhance her other senses, ice and hot oil, feathers and rose petals. I drove her to orgasm several times over with my hands alone. By the time we were making love in earnest, Achika had all but lost herself and become a quivering wreck of a woman, and she adored every moment of it.

Hours after we started, she laid against me, gasping softly as she slowly caught her breath and shuddered spasmodically every minute or so. She didn't say anything. She simply clung to me like I was the only thing that existed... and in her state, I probably was. Eventually, though, she did settle down and found her voice.

"Goddess, I should have known better," she said quietly. "I thought you'd just ride me like there was no tomorrow... I should have realized from what the others said that you like your foreplay."

"You didn't like it?" I asked as I stroked her head.

"Oh sweet Goddess I loved it. I just didn't expect it. You've ruined me now – nothing will ever be the same again. I don't care if I get pregnant every time you do that, it will be worth it!"

I raised an eyebrow at that. "Do you honestly want children so soon?"

Achika finally cracked open one of those gorgeous amethyst eyes of hers and gave me a dreamy smile.

"I may be military, but I've seen plenty of my sisters in the Army on maternity leave... and I have not seen one of them unhappy about the child they were carrying in their arms. I decided a long time ago that when I find the right man I am not going to waste any time. I'll have his child and I will raise it, whether or not he wants it."

"Bold," I said, continuing to stroke her head. I grinned once more and teased, "And am I that man?"

Achika chuckled slowly. "I took a fertility treatment from Washu this morning. I should conceive tonight." At my wide-eyed look, Achika laughed a little more energetically. "I can just imagine it now. A dark-haired little boy. So much like his father. So energetic. So playful. So sweet and loving. He'll make all kinds of noise but no one will care, because he'll just look at you with a huge smile like there could never be anything wrong with the world. He'll be my darling little prince."

I shook my head. “Achika, you are crazy and I love you for it. Let's get some sleep.”
“Yeah,” she sighed. “I don't think I can move anymore anyways.”

I dreamed of trees once more that night. Only I was not a child. I was a man.

The children, though... they were my own. All of them, boy and girls, varying shades of bold and inquisitive. Some were quiet. Other were loud. Some dared. Others calculated. But they all loved passionately.

My sons – eagerly seeking my approval of their works and council in projects to come.

My daughters – crying out for my love and affection, seeking my wisdom about life and love.

I was not alone. There were women, women I knew intimately. I knew their scars and they knew mine. They were the mothers of my children and they would all flock to their respective mothers, clamoring for the warmth, love, and guidance which they gave freely.

And of course, there were the trees.

Quietly watching.

Quietly sheltering.

Quietly protecting.

Quietly giving their love to us all.

But then the dream ended.

I awoke with a sense of great unease.

Achika still slept. The feel of her warm, soft form, the scent of her musk, and the gentle sound of her breathing all comforted me... but even so, the unease permeated the air around me.

Suddenly, something cinched in my gut, almost like the tightness you get right as you vomit...

...and then I was surrounded by a maelstrom of white and gray as a not-wind tore at me ferociously.

Up ahead in the distance, I could see a massive form pulling me closer with a tether of red energy, cackling with wicked glee.

Dr. Clay.

“YOU WILL NOT HAVE HIM!”

I felt the cinching in my guts once more and turned to the source of the voice. It was Tsunami-sama, and she wore a look of fierce determination as she pulled on a tether of blue.

“TSUNAMI-ONEE!” I screamed.

“HANG ON, GAR-KUN!” she called back, her face torn between giving Clay dirty looks and giving me desperate ones as she struggled.

“INSOLENT WENCH!” called out Clay. “HE WILL BE MINE. HE SHALL BEAR MY MARK AND BECOME MY WILLING SERVANT. HE WILL BECOME THE WEAPON OF YOUR DEMISE, AND ONCE YOU ARE BEATEN YOU TOO SHALL BELONG TO ME!”

“Not on your life, you bastard!” I called back. I then took the red tether in my hands... I didn't know what to do, but I figured that if I could will it to break, then maybe...

Clay laughed. “FOOL! YOU DON'T HAVE THE POWER!”

Suddenly, a voice boomed like a great gong struck.

“NONE SHALL PREVAIL.”

And just like that, the red tether ceased to exist... and the backlash hit me.

For a moment all I saw was a brilliant flash of stars as I blacked out for a moment. And I then heard the great voice speak once more.

“FOR TOO LONG YOU HAVE BEEN AWAY IN THIS WORLD, MY SON. AS YOU ARE, I CANNOT BRING YOU BACK. BUT I SHALL NOT LEAVE YOU AS YOU ARE. I GRANT YOU

THIS ONE LAST BLESSING... A TRIAL. EARN YOUR POWER. GAIN YOUR WISDOM.
CLAIM YOUR BIRTHRIGHT.

“SUCCEED AND YOU WILL BECOME MY EQUAL. FAIL AND YOUR SOUL WILL
PERISH WITH YOUR BODY.

“FAREWELL, MY SON.”

I slammed into something. Light and sound flooded my senses, stupefying me for a moment before my body adapted once again. All I could see was a beautiful blue sky, cleaner and more pure than any I have ever seen in my entire life while the wind rushed all around me.

Somewhere there was a scream.

There was a brilliant flash of red and everything went dark once more.

There were no dreams to keep me company this time.

Meanwhile...

Tenju was in an uproar. While it had happened before in the past due to invasions or escaped prisoners, this time it was due to something totally and wholly unprecedented:

The disappearance of a person that was very much beloved to the most powerful people that resided there.

Klaxons rang out. Guardsmen were roused. Trackers were summoned. Elaborate sensors were deployed. But one thing became quickly apparent: no one could tell where Garrick Grimm had disappeared to.

In a special emergency session of the Imperial Court, Emperor Azusa sat on his throne in his sleeping clothes, his crown resting heavily on his troubled brow. To either side of him stood his beloved Queens, both of them orchestrating their respective organizations to find the missing man he had every intent to make into his son. Present as well was Seto as she worked her own information networks, attempting to find out if anyone had missed any sign of some attack. Also present was a distraught Achika, the first to sound the alarm, along with Minagi, Yuki, and Yume.

Slowly, others began to file into the throne room seeking answers.

First was Ayeka, Ryoko, and Tenchi, followed soon by a sleepy Mihoshi. Then came Minaho and Tennyo. Questions were asked. Further confusion was sowed, which then settled into deep and horrified concern. Finally, though, the one person that was thought to have all the answers entered the throne room.

She did not look well at all.

“You can call off the search parties, Your Majesty,” said Washu in a low, depressed tone.
“Garrick is beyond our reach.”

Everyone exchanged confused looks at that pronouncement.

“What do you mean by that, Washu-chan?” asked the Emperor, though not unkindly.

“He's... gone, somehow,” Washu said quietly. “Something yanked at him so hard that it sent him skipping over all the dimensions like a stone skipping on water. I can't even trace where he is at now.”

“But how did this happen!?” cried out Achika. “I mean... he and I were in bed together one moment and the next he was just gone!”

Suddenly, a door slammed open and standing there was Sasami, panting for breath with a dark look of outrage in her eyes.

“Clay,” she said, biting off the word like a grotesque insult.

“But...” said Ayeka in shock, “he would never even dare-”

“Oh, he would,” Washu said darkly. “He would do it just to spite us. And it only stands to reason, too. With Minagi pregnant with his child, and probably Yume and Achika as well, and he about to have his adoption tomorrow... What better way to demoralize us?”

“PREGNANT!?” screamed Ayeka in shock, sending the entire group into scandalized uproar.

“QUIET!” belted out Ryoko as she stomped her foot hard enough to make the entire room shudder. She then turned to Washu and asked, “Isn't there a way we can get Garrick back from Clay?”

“Clay doesn't have Garrick,” declared Sasami and all eyes turned to her. “Tsunami was trying to pull him back away from Clay, but something else interfered... Tsunami does not know what it was... but it was so powerful... she was frightened. It destroyed the binding Clay had on Garrick... without even moving, it did that... and then... it sent Garrick away.”

Ryoko blinked. “You mean... something more powerful than Tsunami!?”

Washu looked to Sasami. “Are you sure?”

Sasami nodded. “I think... it was Garrick's father... His God.”

“But... I thought Tsunami-sama was a god,” said Ayeka in shock.

“Tsunami and the other Choushin might as well be compared to the rest of us,” said Washu quietly. “But this thing... it sounds like it was the real thing.”

“Is there any way we can go after Garrick?” asked Minagi.

Washu sighed. “There's no way for me... Garrick is traveling through a level of existence that is completely unprecedented. I can't even begin to fathom how his God got him to that point, but he did.”

“Is there... anything we can do?” asked Tenchi.

“He is still connected to Katherine,” said Sasami. “That means he is still connected to Tsunami. She can feel him, somehow... I can't even say how far away... she's trying to use the bond she made with him to pull him back... but it's like he's stuck. I think he can become unstuck, but Tsunami needs to keep pulling on him until he comes loose.”

“So, the only thing we can do is wait,” said the Emperor quietly.

Sasami bowed her head. “Yes.”

“So be it,” intoned Emperor Azusa of Jurai. “We will wait. Until then... all we can do is go back to our lives.”

“We shall not!” exclaimed a new voice from the grand entryway.

Azusa scowled at the figures there. “Mimi Tatsuki Jurai. What do you have to present to the court?”

Mimi walked in, followed by the rest of the girls that were to become Garrick's retinue. They all had determined looks on their faces.

“Respectfully, your Majesty, we will not simply return to our lives,” said Mimi, speaking for the entire group. “We don't really have anything waiting for us, aside from the prospect of menial labor in the private sector. Of course, we all have skills, but with things as they are right now they will not feed us.”

Azusa nodded. “And so you all sought employment under Garrick. That is all fine and well, but Garrick is gone now.”

Mimi all but glared at the Emperor. “Garrick is indeed gone, your majesty, but his holdings are not. On top of that, there is the old law where if a woman so desires, she may be under the care of her Fiance's household despite not actually being of his house yet.” Mimi then smirked. “I understand that Garrick's women are all very independent people, but at the same time I think they'll want to make sure that when he returns, it is to a home that is unquestionably his.”

Funaho chuckled softly. “It seems that you have been outmaneuvered, my Husband.”

Azusa grunted. “So it would seem.” He then looked to Mimi once more. “And where would you build this house of his?” he asked pointedly. “Surely not on Abason.”

Mimi then smiled and looked to Achika. “Hoi, Achika. You’re gonna be the first wife. I think this should be your call.”

Achika blinked at suddenly being put on the spot. “But... I’m not sure where to start. I mean, it’s not like I don’t know anything about him, but...”

“Texas,” Minagi said suddenly.

There were some confused looks at that, as well as some mutterings of, “What planet is that?”

Achika’s eyes, though, lit up. “Oh! Texas is where Garrick is from on Earth - it’s an independently operated state within a federalist nation called the United States of America.”

Washu smiled and piped up, “I think I know exactly where Garrick would want to set up shop.” With a gesture, a holographic image appeared of a land of high, rolling hills covered in verdant sage and grass and gnarled oaks and mesquites. And Bluebonnets. An entire field of Bluebonnets with a brown, dusty road winding through it.

The throne room suddenly exploded into excited, girlish squealing.